



Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**

Average of 25 ●
x 365 days
x 300 years
x (2+2 EXP)
Level 99

★ ★ ★ I've Been Killing
SLIMES for **300** Years
and Maxed Out My Level ★ ★ ★



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I've Been Killing
SLIMES 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level.



Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**









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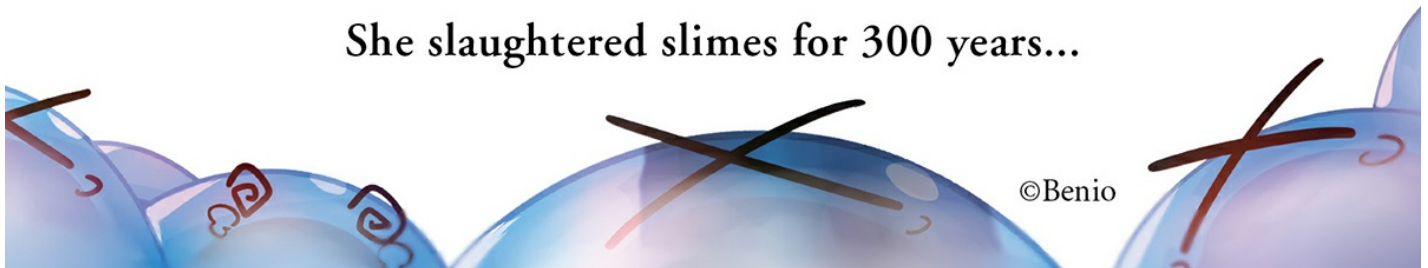
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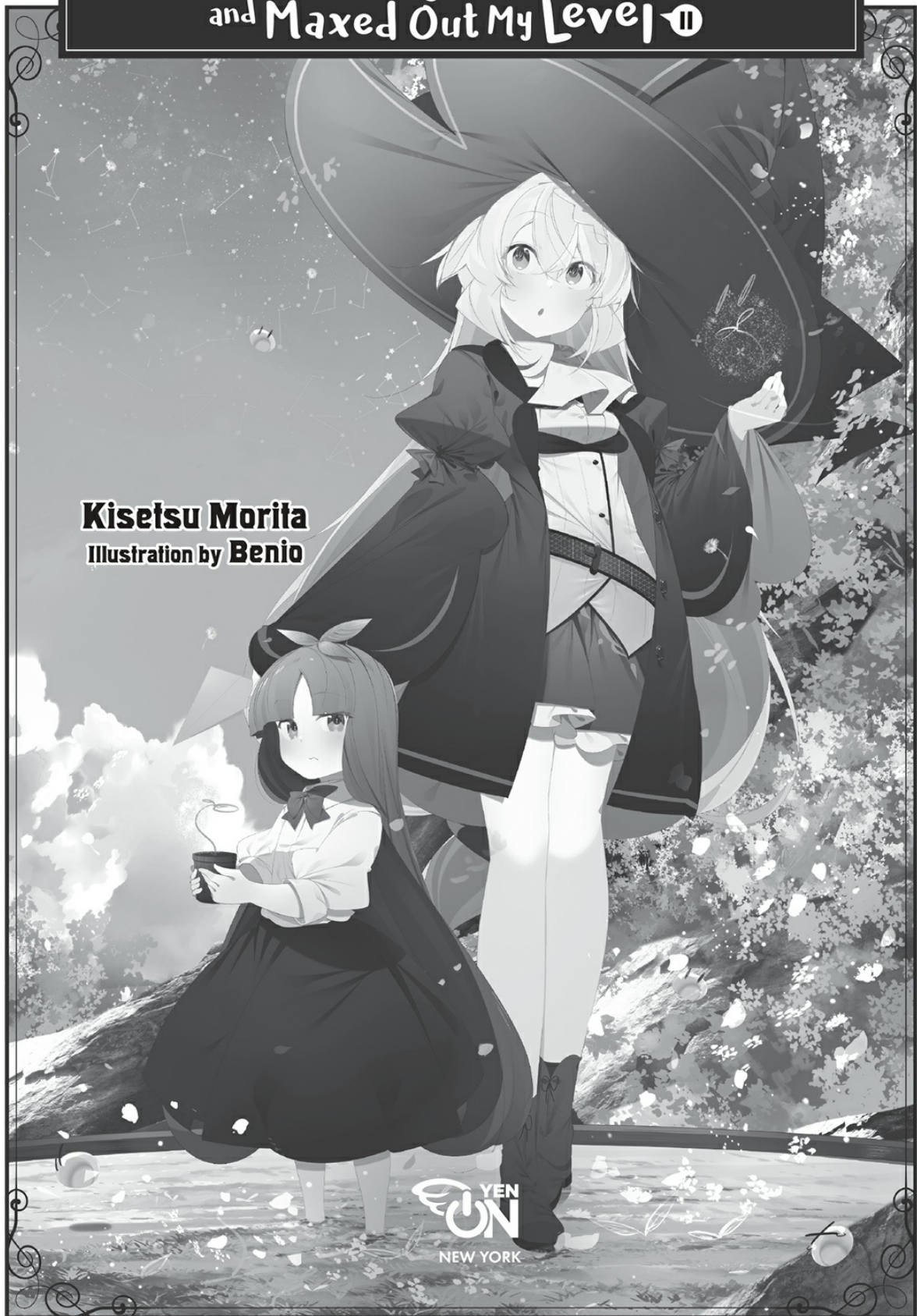
She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

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I've Been Killing **SLIMES** for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 10

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 11

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 11

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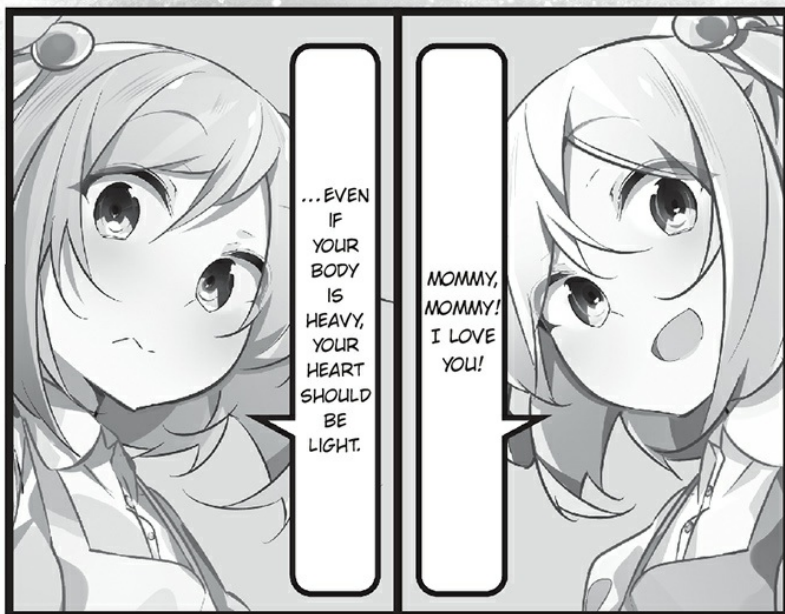
AZUSA AIZAWA

The protagonist. Commonly known as the Witch of the Highlands. A girl (?) who was reincarnated as an immortal witch with the appearance of a seventeen-year-old. Before she knew what was happening, she'd become the strongest being in the world. Although she's had some rough times, it has ultimately given her a family, and she's delighted about it.

LAIKA

A dragon-girl and Azusa's apprentice. She aims to reach the heights of power and is a good, earnest, hardworking girl. Gothic Lolita clothes, maid outfits, and other frilly things suit her very well (which embarrasses her). She is the main character in this book's spin-off, *The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls*.





FALFA AND SHALSHA

Spirit sisters born from a conglomeration of slime souls. Falfa, the older sister, is a carefree girl who's honest about her own feelings. Shalsha, the younger sister, is considerate and attentive to others. They both love their mother, Azusa.

HALKARA

A young elf woman and Azusa's apprentice. She is an upstanding CEO who runs a company using her knowledge of mushrooms, but in the house in the highlands, she's known for her knack for screwing up.



BEELZEBUB

A high-ranking demon known as the Lord of the Flies and the demons' minister of agriculture. She frequently shuttles between the demon realm and the house in the highlands. She's Azusa's reliable "big sister" surrogate.





I AM IN
NO MOOD
TO BE
FRIENDLY
WITH A
RED
DRAGON!

FLATORTE

A blue dragon-girl who obeys what Azusa says. Since she's a dragon like Laika, there is somewhat of a rivalry between them, but she's an optimistic and energetic girl. Unlike Laika, she has a tail in human form.



SANDRA

A mandragora girl. After growing for three hundred years, she gained sentience and the ability to move around. She is a literal plant and lives in the vegetable garden in the house in the highlands. She's often stubborn and puts up a front, but she also craves the company of others.



I'LL
JUST BE
IN THE
GARDEN!
GRRR!



THE
WORLD
SHOULD
BE PURE
WHITE,
STEP-
MOTHER!

WYNONA

A slime spirit born after Falfa and Shalsha. She's cautious and is distant with Azusa, whom she treats like a stepmother. She's already actively a top-rated adventurer, but she's oddly obsessed with the color white.



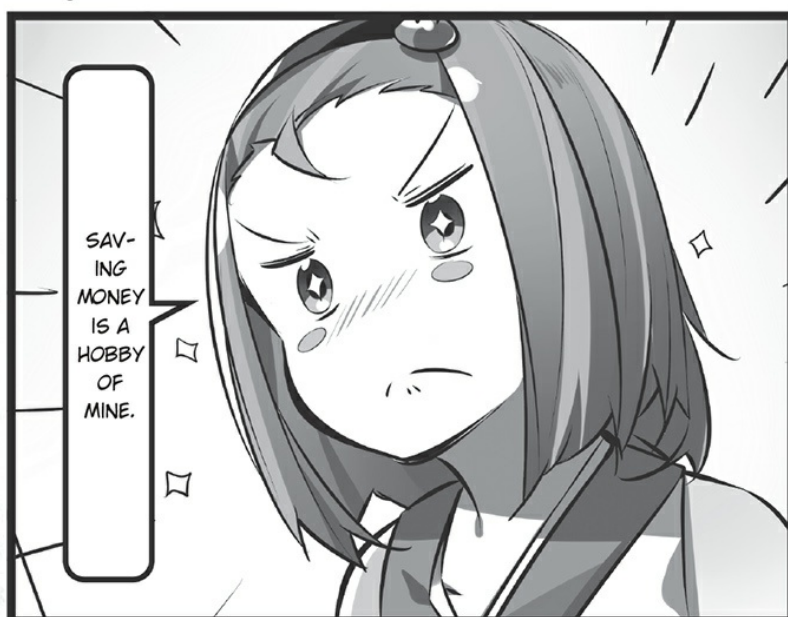


PECORA (PROVATO PECORA ARIÉS)

The Demon King.
A girl with a devilish temperament who loves to use her power and influence to bewilder her subordinates and Azusa. She actually has a masochistic desire to be subordinate to someone stronger than she is, and she adores Azusa.

FATLA AND VANIA

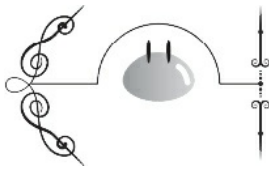
Leviathan sisters who work as Beelzebub's secretaries. They can transform into giant dragons, and they transport Azusa and company to the demon lands as well as look after them. The elder sister, Fatla, is a stable and capable girl. The younger sister, Vania, is ditzy but a good cook.



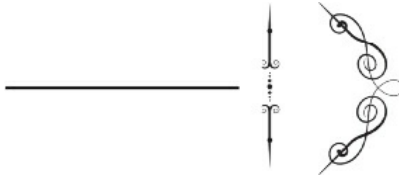
FIGHTSLY

A Fighter Slime who took the form of a human to master the martial arts. She wants to become the strongest martial artist ever with her Fighsly-style slime fist, but she has a less-noble love of money. Currently training as Beelzebub's apprentice.





WE DINED UNDER THE MOONLIGHT



I was hovering outside a window, waving to someone who seemed startled to see me.

I thought she'd close the curtains on me, but instead, she opened the window.

"Good evening!"

"Stepmother, how on earth did you get here?! And it's nighttime!"

Wynona just wanted to complain to me...

"Well, you never open the door when I knock, and it's too much work to walk all those long hallways in your mansion, and sometimes you're away on a long adventure when I get here. That's why I decided to come straight to your window."

"I suppose I'll allow it. Then what is it you need at this hour, Stepmother?"

She sure always made it a point to stay "stepmother," didn't she?

"You put the lights on at night, so I know right away if you're home," I said.

"Pretty genius idea, if I do say so myself."

Wynona flung the curtains closed.

"Hey! At least listen to me! Leave a crack in the curtains! I haven't even said what I came to say, just why I'm here at night!"

The curtains slid apart again. Communicating with my stepdaughter wasn't easy.

"What do you need?" she asked. "You have fifteen seconds."

“Let me in first. I’ve been floating like this up here with my magic for ages.”

Wynona’s mansion was in a remote area, so I doubted there was anyone around to peek up my skirt, but it sure was airy down there.

Wynona gave a dramatic, spiteful sigh, which I assumed meant yes. I entered the very white room through the window.

“Well? You only have five seconds left.”

“I lost ten seconds?! You were counting this whole time?!”

My explanation probably wasn’t going to fit in five seconds, so I was just going to talk for however long it took. *I’m your stepmother, and I’m gonna act like it!*

“So all the spirits are getting together soon for a moon-watching party. Hmm, that’s a fairly Japanese concept... Basically, they’re having dinner under the moon.”

“Oh? That sounds exciting,” Wynona replied, gazing out into the distance without any visible sign of excitement. There was nothing amicable about her at all.

“We were hoping you’d come along, Wynona.”

“I will go if I can, Stepmother.”

“That’s what you say when you have no intention of going!”

“Oh, my pickled cabbage should be well pickled by now—would you like some in bread? It is late, by the way. Are you all right on time?”

Would you like some ochazuke? is something people from Kyoto ask when they want their guests to leave, signifying they don’t have much to offer besides tea and rice. And that’s what Wynona was pulling on me! How badly did she want me to leave?!

“Aww, come on, they’d love it if you came to see the other spirits! I know I’m meddling, but...!”

“Stepmother, it’s far worse to do something like this in full awareness of the trouble you’re causing.”

Grrr...

Well, it's not like I'm inviting everyone, and I wouldn't keep asking if I knew you truly hated the idea of going. You're practically oozing with Please invite me! vibes. And you'd probably lose your mind if I didn't! This would be way easier if you said you'd just invite yourself, like Beelzebub!

—I wished I could say all that, but then she absolutely would not come, so I had no choice but to swallow my words. Interpersonal issues were tough. I guess no matter the place or time, a relationship with a stepdaughter was always going to have its fair share of difficulty.

“Very well, very well. I swear I shall go if I am able.”

“That doesn't really count as swearing, does it?”

But I'd done all I could do and gotten what I came for. If Wynona ultimately chose to stay home, then there were no regrets in it for me. And she wouldn't get upset later about not getting invited.

“Well, I'm over my time limit, so I'll be off.”

“While you're here, why not have a cup of tea? I should offer you something, lest I seem inhospitable.” She seemed a little bashful about it. That was a long battle.

“And bring the dragon you came in on.”

Now, that was considerate! “Sure, Laika's waiting downstairs, so I'll go get her!”

And so the third time was indeed the charm to successfully invite Wynona (the other two times, she was away adventuring).



Then came the evening of the moonlight dinner.

I took Falfa and Shalsha along with me as we walked from the house in the highlands to the hill beside ours.

There were no houses around at all, no roads or anything, either—nothing but short grass.

There, we found Misjantie the pine spirit laying out a blanket.

“Oh, Miss Misjantie!”

“We are happy to see you today.”

Falfa and Shalsha greeted her.

“Happy to see you, too, man. Nice work getting here on time!”

“I mean, we usually are,” I replied. “Oh, I guess spirits have a loose grasp of time.”

“Curalina the jellyfish spirit came three days early, man. She’s had nothing but time on her hands.”

In the distance, Curalina was lying faceup on the grass, watching the sky.

“That’s way too early!”

“That’s how she starts composing her next work, man, so it was perfect for her. Spirits never think of a day or two as a waste.”

That definitely seemed like a spirit’s sense of time.

“Momma Yufufu’s not here yet?”

“Nope. She could be here in three seconds or in three days, man.”

I hoped she’d at least come sometime in the next three hours. Well, I trusted she’d be on time.

“And what about Canimeow, the moon spirit?”

She hadn’t been around as a spirit for very long, so it’d be in her best interest to deepen her friendships.

Back when I was a corporate slave, I am sure I would have hated the idea of going to a drinking party just for the sake of networking, and I would have given up on friends if I couldn’t handle them.

Now I don’t hate the idea of banquets and dinners and drinking parties, and that’s probably because the people who come are a lot of fun.

Maybe this is obvious, but how much fun an event is changes drastically depending on who attends. Company dinners were composed entirely of people from the company, so it felt like work, but I don’t have anyone like that

in this world.

“Oh, Canimeow’s over there, man.”

There was a massive altar sitting on the hill, and Canimeow was sitting neatly in front of it!

“What is that?!”

“She says she’s tryna commune with the moon, man. It’s kinda her thing.”

The main point of a dinner wasn’t spiritual stuff...

**“Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmoon ♪
The full moon, the half-moon, the crescent, all kinds of moons~
♪ But the moon stays perfectly round all the time~ ♪ How strange
is that~ ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪”**

“Stop singing that song!! Or at least don’t sing the full version!!”

Not too long afterward, Canimeow’s song came to an end.

“*Huff, huff...* I am as earnest as I can be, but the moon still won’t reply... And *I’m* the moon spirit!”

“Is it supposed to contact you like that...?”

This dinner was a mess, and it hadn’t even started yet.

A little while afterward, Momma Yufufu arrived. “Sorry~ I was late because I was making meals for us~ Let’s all enjoy ourselves today, okay~?”

“I have a feeling things will start coming together now that you’re here, Momma Yufufu.”

Curalina was still lying down, staring at the moon. She had the right idea, in a way, since this was a moon-viewing party, but there was no point coming here if that’s all we were doing.

“Well, that’s how things are. This is a spirit gathering, after all. Oh, and the mud spirit and the mist spirit and the hot spring spirit won’t be coming.”

“There were three more coming?!”

All the ones I'd never met before weren't coming!

"Oh well! I haven't seen the mist spirit in over a hundred years. They didn't come to the last World Spirit Summit, either."

I think if she hasn't seen the mist spirit in a hundred years, then their friendship is probably over...

Momma Yufufu fetched the dozing Curalina, dragged over Canimeow as she desperately tried to talk to the moon, and quickly began setting things up.

"Well, then! Let us relax and enjoy ourselves with the beautiful moon! Cheers!"

""Cheeeeeers!""

Following Momma Yufufu's lead, we clinked our cups together.

The large white disc hung in the sky far above us, so bright that we didn't need any other source of light.

"Yeah, this is nice, man." Misjantie was a spirit, but she sure was downing her drinks fast. *Ooh, that's an impressive pace*—but then Curalina beside her was gulping down her alcohol even faster.

They were pouring their cups full, then knocking them back, serving and drinking over and over again.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on! You're drinking too much! This can't be good for you!"

"...Decadence, decadence. There is nothing good in this world. The only time I am happy is when I'm drunk. Jelly, jelly, jellyfish... This world is jelly, jelly, jelly..."

We were just here to admire the moon, so why were they diving headfirst into the alcohol...?

But they weren't the only ones indulging. Canimeow was silently gulping down her drink.

"And *you* are handling this all wrong! You're not drinking alone! This is a party!"

"The best way to enjoy drinks is to do so at one's own pace with no interference from anyone else. That's just how it is."

It did make sense, but then maybe she shouldn't be coming to these events...

On the other hand, Falfa and Shalsha were having a grand time dining and chatting with Momma Yufufu.

"Miss Yufufu, these meat wraps are so tasty!"

"We are eating a wonderful meal in the open breeze with the moon overhead. This is true luxury."

"Oh, you both are so kind~ ♪ Momma's so glad to have worked as hard as she did~"

Hanging with them would be the safest choice...

Even when you try to build up new relationships at a party, you always end up staying with the people you were already close to. But that's okay.

There was one other thing that bothered me, however.

Wynona hadn't shown up.

Maybe a sudden drinking party like this was too much for her after all? Maybe I should've eased her into our group with something easy, like a teatime cake buffet?

But even if it made me the meddlesome one, I still thought it was a good idea to keep inviting people like Wynona to things... She wasn't the kind to contact me herself anyway.

That said, there was no right answer. Everyone was different when it came to these things, so in the end, I wasn't sure what was right. Only Wynona could know what was best for her—although she might not even know herself!

"Hey, you're lookin' a little blue, man," Misjantie commented. "Oh, I know. Gained some weight?"

"I'm gonna personally cut down every pine tree in the world."

"No way, man! The pines have done nothing wrong! If you're gonna cut anything down, cut me—no, actually, the pines can take it..."

"You have no pride as the pine spirit!"

Then Momma Yufufu came up to me. Her face was a bit flushed, probably

because she'd had something to drink.

"It's little Wynona, isn't it? You don't need to worry about her too much; I know things'll work out on their own."

Of course Momma Yufufu would know about this stuff.

"Yeah. She's enjoying life on her own terms..."

"You are still young, Azusa. You should think things over for longer periods of time. There is no good in rushing."

"I'm young...? Yeah! Heck yeah, I'm young! I'm just three hundred years old!" I was the third-youngest here, after Falfa and Shalsha. That wasn't a problem at all.

"And you've had some good talks with Wynona, haven't you?" Momma Yufufu continued. "This will go quite easily for you; I know it."

"Yeah, I need to be more carefree—like you, Momma."

Things were going my way a lot recently. So that was probably why I was so preoccupied with Wynona.

Everyone was living by their own ideals, so sometimes people didn't quite line up. That's just how the world works.

"My goodness. You are rather quiet for having invited me, aren't you?"

I heard a voice from far away. When I turned around, I saw Wynona standing in the distance.

"I was expecting to hear you all from town, so that is why I ended up searching for you."

"You're here, Wynona!" I ran over to her and pulled her into a hug.

"You are suffocating me... You are the one who invited me in the first place, Stepmother..."

Oh, she's not enjoying that; I should let her go.

"I honestly thought you weren't going to come."

"You do not need to share every thought you have with me," Wynona

retorted, then went straight to Falfa and Shalsha and gave them respectful bows.

“Sisters, it is lovely to see you again. How have you been?”

“Each day has been well.”

“Falfa’s been great!”

“I am delighted to hear that. I am aware of how incompetent I may be, so I am looking forward to your further instruction and encouragement.”

It was obvious the difference in attitude she had when she talked with her sisters versus her stepmother...

But my work here was now done.

“We have all kinds of drinks here, Wynona. Do you want something?” I offered.

“If I may, Stepmother, I would like either white wine or cloudy rice wine.”

So her alcohol had to be white, too, huh? *But white wine isn’t white, it’s clear.*

“You should say hello to the other spirits, Wynona. You should have a network.”

“Indeed. An adventurer can only do so much without a party, so I understand. However”—Wynona gave a tired sigh—“it seems the majority of them have turned in for the night.”

I followed her gaze.

Curalina, who had been drinking with ferocious vigor, was sunk.

Canimeow, who had been quietly drinking by herself, was sunk.

Misjantie was also pleasantly drunk, babbling nonsense.

The spirits had no idea how to pace themselves!

“You’re all long-lived—at least learn how to hold your liquor!”

“I suppose this is how things are with spirits. It seems to me that the life of an adventurer is far preferable.”

“It was way better at the World Spirit Summit! I think I just picked the wrong

people today...or they're just outliers..."

At this rate, inviting Wynona was going to have the opposite effect from what I wanted.

"Well, no matter. I am happy to be able to speak with my sisters."

It didn't seem like this was much of a problem for her, probably because her expectations were already on the floor. But her expression never changed much from her cool default, so I also wasn't entirely sure.

"The moon is so beautiful today, my sisters, so why don't we write poems?"

"Wow! That sounds like fun! Falfa wants to try!"

"Drowning oneself in alcohol is hardly life. There is no beauty in a life without poetry—according to a philosopher from the Omiyakes Dynasty."

They were about to embark on a very cultured activity.

"Very well, then. I shall start—**The white wolf howls at the moon.**"

And of course, the wolf was white. It sounded like each of them was going to say a line for the poem.

"Awoooo, awoooo," Falfa howled. Does that count?

"The only friend he has to soothe his loneliness is the moon," Shalsha said. This was a poem, after all, so it needed cool lines like that one.

Wynona glanced at me. "Will you be joining us, Stepmother?"

"Oh, I'd be glad to! But...I don't know what to say..."

"Please add a refined, poetic line that expresses enough education and artistry to earn my respect."

"Don't be so unreasonable with your stepmother!"

It was entirely possible that I was being included simply out of spite.

"Hmm, let's see..." I wasn't sure what to do about poetry for the moon... Maybe it was time to put my past-life memories to use... **"There lives a rabbit on the dark side of the moon, making special bread of**

pounded rice... H-how's that?"

The pounded rice bread thing was mochi, by the way.

Wynona stared at me blankly. "What on earth is that...? Why are you introducing a rabbit...? It goes wholly against conventional wisdom, but it is surprisingly convincing... I suppose including the element of surprise is one poetry technique..."

Hey, she approved!

"Round two, then—**Those who eat the moon's white bread live long.**"

She was talking about the color white again, but she was right because mochi was white.

"Falfa's turn! Ummm... **If you live a long time, you can make lots of friends!**" Falfa said. It sounded like she was sticking to her elementary school song lyrics idea.

"Shalsha's turn. **And once those friends become naught but white bone, we regret not making the moon our only friend.**"

That sure was dark, Shalsha...

"This is your second go, Stepmother. You have three seconds." Wynona was only this strict with me!

"Hmm, moon things, moon things..."

I decided to use my past-life memories again. That was my only source of inspiration. "**The moon princess committed a crime and was cast down into our world, where she became a beautiful queen. The queen had eternal life, and in the thousand years she waited to return to the moon, she ruled the world—**how's that?"

I gave the story of *Kaguya-hime* a little makeover. I think I was over my allotted time, though.

“Stepmother, where on earth are you coming up with these lines? Is this a folktale? You have been introducing strange ideas this whole time!”

Wynona was overreacting again!

“Hmm, this is far too long for a single line of a poem, but I appreciate the unique story building... If we can insert the story into a poetic framework without losing any part of the concept, then it is entirely possible that she may make a name for herself as a poet... I cannot say it is a fine piece of work, but it certainly is unique...”

She sounded like a judge for a writing contest, offering comments to the winner of the newcomer’s prize.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Yep, thanks!”

“You’re a genius, Mommy!”

“It is as though we are being led to a new era. The new winds always come with pros and cons.”

But my daughters always praised me, so that didn’t feel bad at all.

Our poem-writing game ended there, and after that, we moved on to light chatter.

Falfa and Shalsha, especially, had a lot of questions for Wynona, and Wynona answered them a bit stiffly, like she was here for a job interview.

“You’re so famous as an adventurer, Sister Wynona! That’s so cool!”

“As your older sister, Shalsha is proud. It is an honor to have someone like you as a younger sister.”

I had a feeling Shalsha just wanted to say the words *younger* and *older sister*. The only time she got to truly act like a big sister was when she was around Wynona.

“Oh, no. I would never be as great as you, my sisters. I must apply myself to my utmost, so I do not sully the name of slime spirits.”

I doubt slime spirits have much of a name to begin with.

Wynona still spoke with utmost politeness, but her expression was starting to

soften.

I'd practically forced her to come, but I was glad I had invited her. She was more than welcome to invite herself over all the time to see Falfa and Shalsha, like Beelzebub. Well, maybe half as often as Beelzebub...

"What a lovely moon," Momma Yufufu commented to me as I watched my daughters. She knew how a mother felt, too.

"It's nice watching the girls be so happy together in the moonlight. It's different from the house in the highlands, but it's still just as nice."

"Indeed~ And the moon is much brighter and bigger than usual tonight~ Truly, how is it doing that? Is it giving off light?"

I doubted it was making its own light, but I wasn't sure of the celestial rules here in this world. I didn't have astronomical expertise, so I didn't know how it would be different from the solar system Earth was in.

"I don't think it's making its own light, but...in this world, there could be a powerful sorcerer making it glow..."

"I have been a droplet spirit for a very long time, yet I don't know. But the mystery just makes it that much more enticing, doesn't it?" Momma Yufufu leaned on my shoulder.

The night wind felt nice in my tipsy state.

Then a scream shattered the silence.

"Exactly! How *is* that moon doing that?! Tell me! Tell me everything!"

Canimeow the moon spirit shot to her feet.

So she had come back to life after her alcohol-induced nap. No, wait, maybe this was a bad effect from drinking too much?

"My, my, Canimeow. You should drink some water. I am the droplet spirit, you know. I'll take care of that~"

Momma Yufufu was treating her like a child... Well, I guess Canimeow was one of the youngest among the spirits, age-wise.

"No! I'm not drunk! I'm not drunk at all!"

“That’s something a drunk person would say...” I pulled back a bit.

No one else in the house in the highlands got drunk like this, so I wasn’t used to it. Halkara usually passed out immediately, so she was harmless. No, well, I guess she vomited in the weirdest places, so maybe not completely harmless...

“I’m telling you, I’m not drunk! I’m as normal as I have ever been!”

If she was really like this when she wasn’t drunk, then that was even worse.

“Oh yeah, I guess Canimeow’s one of those types with a switch inside her. Once it gets flipped, she goes nuts. She was like that when she told us she was the moon spirit.”

“Yes, yes, exactly~ She’s at the age where these sorts of fits are normal~ She’s going through a rebellious phase. We should make sure she doesn’t start going down the wrong path in life.”

“Momma Yufufu, she’s already working hard as a fortune-teller, so you don’t need to worry about her taking any wrong paths. She’s already independent.”

“Oh, you’re right. Then there’s nothing to worry about. That settles it.”

Yep. And we all lived happily ever after.

“You both are completely missing the point!” Canimeow wailed. “It doesn’t matter if I’m independent or not! This is about the moon!” She flung her right hand up and pointed at the sky.

“What? Is this your transformation sequence? Don’t tell me you’re the S*il*r Moon of this world?”

“You won’t transform by looking at the moon~ Unless you’re a lycanthrope.”

“No!!!”

My daughters, the drunken Curalina, and Misjantie all came over to observe Canimeow’s excitement.

“I’m the moon spirit! I’m right beneath the full moon, and I still can’t do anything! Is it supposed to be like this?! It can’t be! It can’t!”

Ah... Something struck her moon-spirit chord.

Canimeow definitely was the moon spirit, even if she couldn’t control the

moon at will. On the other hand, it would be a big problem if she could make it collide with the earth...

“...Despair in the face of helplessness is a sign that you are alive. I’d say you can experience despair *because* you are alive. Jelly, jelly, jellyfish, fish, fish...”

Curalina’s negative statements told me she wasn’t seeing much of a problem here.

“That idea is consistent with existentialist philosophy. That is different from nihilism. It is the very act of despairing that allows us to think about the meaning of our lives. How fascinating.” Shalsha was sympathizing in her own (very unique) way.

“—You heard what she said. Miss Canimeow, why not try despairing? Your despair is yours alone. No one will take it away from you.” Wynona sounded polite, but what she was saying was essentially *You’re on your own*. She was so cool toward everyone...

“No. I’d be making a total fool of myself if I just sat here doing nothing under such a beautiful moon! I don’t want to perform this clown act! I want to get involved somehow!”

I wanted to tell her it wasn’t possible, but I kind of understood how she felt.

“I suppose it is insulting for the moon spirit to be powerless at a moon-viewing party...”

“You understand, Azusa. I want to do something more...moon-spirit-like! I want to make a commitment!” Canimeow was really wound up now.

I wasn’t sure what she was going to do, but I was glad she was enthusiastic.

“I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to the moon!”

“Ahhh, the moon. The perfect place to get away and find yourse—wait, seriously?!”

Her destination was literally so far out there that I didn’t exactly register it at first.

“You know this is the *moon*, Canimeow! There’s no way you can get there! You can take a trip on the carriages forever and you still wouldn’t get there!”

“What do you mean, carriages?” She hadn’t heard of them. “You’re right, I have no way of getting there—that’s a normal thing to say. But if I keep at it, then my dreams will come true. I won’t accomplish anything if I don’t believe in myself. That’s why I’m going to the moon! I *will* go to the moon! I’d still go, even if it’s farther away than the other side of the world! You want to laugh? Laugh all you want!”

Incredible... She sounded like the main character in a shounen manga...

Falfa and Misjantie were applauding, for some reason. I guess it did sound cool, in a way.

But one of us was a realist who wasn’t going to praise her.

“—And how *exactly* do you intend to get there? Moon travel is beyond my area of expertise, so I would be fascinated to hear your plans in detail.” Wynona was needling her so politely! “Your enthusiasm is truly inspiring, Miss Canimeow. I hope to learn from you in that regard. That is why I am eager to know your plans, even if it is just a basic overview. As an adventurer, I have seen countless peers who have said what they thought was impressive in a moment of passion, yet failed spectacularly when it came time to act. So I hope to hear the concrete, actionable details of your claim, unlike those I just mentioned. I am looking forward to it.”

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That was thoroughly malicious!

Canimeow, meanwhile, hung her head, her face scarlet.

Yeah... I knew this already, but she didn't have any plans at all...

"You aren't embarrassed, are you? But you were the one who said your dreams will come true if you persevere, and I doubt you would be too embarrassed to say so if you are that strong-willed about this. For you, shame is a thing of the past, no?"

"You're going too far, Wynona! You're going to make her cry!"

My stepdaughter was terrifying! This spiteful rant could go on forever!

Wynona glared at me.

I was starting to feel like I was going to be the next target.

"Stepmother, I am an adventurer. In this line of work, approaching a challenge with a lackadaisical attitude and a vague hope that 'everything will be all right' is a costly, even deadly mistake. One can only survive by taking caution after caution. Prioritizing one's feelings alone will expose allies to danger as well."

"Yeah, I know..."

"That is why I cannot stand those who gloat with such superficial nonsense. I am simply asking her not to pretend a lack of planning is something to be proud of. It is a slap in the face to those who live measured lives. You must not allow her to do such things."

It all made sense logically, but she was being so ornery about it...

Canimeow was miserable, unable to say anything else. Her heart was being smashed to bits...

"Wynona, what you said was too strong. Making her cry isn't going to solve anything."

"Let her cry if she must, Stepmother. Better to cry now than before a monster in a dungeon. Will one's life be spared by begging before a monster that understands no speech?"

Argh! Wynona was so hardheaded; she wasn't going to budge!

It was totally unexpected to see a daughter of mine make someone else suffer this much. Falfa and Shalsha were such good kids...

"Step" as I may have been, I still had to do something here as her mother.

"Fine, then I'll help her act like the moon spirit she is! That good enough for you?!"

When I screamed, the whole area around me fell quiet. I could even hear the sound of the bugs nearby.

Everyone was way too quiet...

"I see how it is." Wynona sighed deeply. It was a sigh not of frustration but of acknowledgment. "I understand. If you say so, Stepmother, then I am certain it will go over well. I cannot say I know what 'moon-spirit-like' truly entails, but you will surely succeed. You are capable of that, Stepmother."

I was sure she was complimenting me, but couldn't she have put it a little more nicely?

"Thanks, Wynona."

I was glad she finally stood down.

"I am a slime spirit, by the way, but I have never thought about acting in a way a slime spirit should. I believe it is much better to live in a way one finds enjoyable instead of being tied to any particular identity. However—that is an opinion that differs from person to person."

Then stop trying to argue her down.

That sometimes crossed my mind, too—that if I were in Wynona's position, then Canimeow would seem way too pathetic.

But also, had Wynona just said the part about not being tied down by identity first, then things wouldn't have come to this. I wished she'd rethink how she went about these things.

"Thank you, Azusa...," Canimeow said, grasping at the hem of my clothes.

There was a weight to her thank-you that was different from mine, as if I'd

actually saved her life.

“Oh, I didn’t do anything to warrant any thanks.”

It was a parent’s duty to stop her daughter if she was misbehaving, but Wynona also wanted to tell her not to worry too much about the things she couldn’t do. I wished Canimeow would understand that, too. Wynona didn’t get angry for no reason.

“You’ll help me do things a moon spirit should do. You’ll even take me to the moon...”

“Oh... So that’s what you were thanking me for...”

Oh no. I don’t know how to get to the moon...

I had a feeling this was about to be a real handful.

“If you’ve got Azusa’s help, man, you’re practically already there! I’ll drink to that!” Misjantie was filling everyone’s cups!

Stop this, pine spirit! You’re cutting off my escape route!

“Hey, you think the super-rich of the world would be interested if we held weddings on the moon? I could probably charge, like, five or even ten billion gold, man!”

Her mind went straight to making money...

“It’s not like anyone knows how much it costs to get to the moon anyway, man. I can charge whatever I want! I think this’ll work!”

Okay, but stop drawing business blueprints in your mind.

It had gotten cold, so it wasn’t long before our moonlight party came to an end. Except now I had homework.

How was I supposed to get to the moon?

If I had my phone, I could just search *how to get to the moon*. But even if I got results, enacting the process was an entirely different matter...

Wait. We were all drunk when we had the discussion, so if I left it alone, then maybe it’d just vanish from our consciousnesses.

I doubted Wynona was going to come up and ask how my moon plans were going. She probably wasn't all that interested in the moon anyway.

Right, I'll just let it sit for a bit.

Adults needed these secrets to success in life...

I wasn't the protagonist of a shounen manga, so I didn't feel the need to reach the moon...



A few days later, Canimeow came to the house in the highlands.

"So? How are we getting to the moon?"

"Oh, you remember..."

I was too rash—just another sap who said too much and set myself up for failure when I was drunk. But it was too late now. Canimeow trusted me completely.

"Look, I never said I was going to take you to the moon. I just said I was going to help you act like the moon spirit, okay?"

Let's bring the goalposts a little closer.

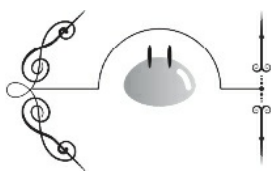
"Okay. But acting like the moon spirit entails going to the moon."

She sure was keen... I think this was the most difficulty I'd had of late.

"You can't figure out how to get there with your fortune-telling?"

"If I could, I would have told that fortune three hundred times by now."

I guess that made sense. Well, we had no other way to find out, then. It'd been a long time since I was in this much trouble...



WE INVESTIGATED WHETHER WE CAN GO TO THE MOON



“You must have some ideas, right? We can try each suggestion you have one by one,” said Canimeow.

I hung my head. I didn’t have a mirror, but I was sure I had a tense smile on my face. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, smiling is all you can do. “...I don’t have any.”

“Hmm? I didn’t hear you.”

Don’t make me say it again! I should’ve just said it louder the first time around!

“I don’t have any ideas! We can’t go to the moon!”

“What?! You don’t? That can’t be true, right? You must have something?”

Canimeow grabbed my shoulders and shook me. *Shake me all you want; nothing’ll come out. I’m already empty.*

“I mean, it’s the *moon*... It’s not really realistic to just go straight up...”

“But it’s *your* job to do something about that! Help me! Make me into the moon spirit I’m supposed to be! My identity’s in danger!”

What she was asking me to do was much, much more difficult than trying to defeat the most legendary monsters.

By the way, I did ask Falfa, a resident expert in the natural sciences, if there was any precedent for going to the moon. Points for effort, right?

She’d replied, “No one’s been before~”

I also asked Laika and Flatorte, “What would happen if a dragon flew straight

upward?”

They told me that when you reached a certain point in the sky, the air got so thin, you would suffocate.

Though this was a fantasy world, it seemed as though we needed oxygen to live. Low oxygen levels in the upper atmosphere were the same as on Earth. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any plants or human communities like back on Earth.

Still, Canimeow wouldn't be satisfied if we didn't at least try some things.

“Canimeow, this is a big project. We need to get some research in. We'll take baby steps together!” I cobbled together some optimistic sentiments.

“Okay! We *will* go to the moon! I will be the first to go to the moon from this planet!”

Please don't start making a bunch of idealistic proclamations. You'll get upset again if it's completely impossible...

“But to be honest, I know it's probably practically impossible to get to the moon.” A sad smile suddenly crossed her face. “But I wanted to do all I could first to concretely know that it isn't possible. I hate saying what is and isn't when I don't know the details.”

“Oh, Canimeow...”

So she was aware of it all along.

“...Then why didn't you say something to Wynona back then?! We could've avoided all this!”

“I couldn't! I was too embarrassed in front of everyone else! All I could do with those slime spirits was yell at them!”

And in the end, I was the only one at the whims of other people!

“*Sigh...* We'd have to ask a god if we wanted to go to the moon...”

Wait.

Hold on a second.

Why don't we ask a god?



Canimeow and I hopped onto dragon Laika's back and headed for the Grand Nintan Temple in Nintania.

I wouldn't be surprised if Nintan, who had served as a goddess in this world for a very long time, knew a thing or two.

But when I first told Canimeow we were going to meet a god, she was shocked.

"What?! You're not supposed to meet gods, right? I mean, they're gods!"

"You're a spirit. I could say the same for you..."

What was the difference between gods and spirits in this world anyway? I had a feeling the only thing that was different was how they were ranked.

Gods didn't usually live in the physical world, visible to everyone, so I wondered if that was it. It wasn't like wandering around Nintan's temple would have you bumping into her. And while it changed from spirit to spirit, there were some who led lives that were practically human.

But Godly Godness had appeared in corporeal form, so that way of dividing them wasn't totally applicable... Maybe I should just treat her like an exception... It wasn't like she was originally from this world anyway. She was like an exotic species.

The pond at the Grand Nintan Temple, once the site of mosquito-and crocodile-related troubles, was now neatly maintained. It felt good to see the results of our work.

"Yes, it's a refreshingly nice garden now!"

"You certainly like gardens. It's not a bad thing, but it's old-fashioned and kind of tame. I think it'd be better with a crocodile or two in the pond."

"No! Don't you dare waste our efforts!"

We'd had to drain all the water in this pond to restore the environment here, you know.

"So we can really meet this goddess Nintan just by showing up at her temple?"

“Yeah, we should be able to.”

We entered the temple and faced the goddess Nintan’s bronze statue.

“Uh, you know that’s a statue, right? We can’t say we’ve met her like this. Her believers might have some spiritual experience and get the impression that they’ve met her, but...”

“I’m telling you, we’re going to see the real thing right now.” I took Canimeow’s hand.

“Huh? Is there a rule that two people have to hold hands together here?”

“No traditional reason. I’ve just heard that we could run into some trouble if we let go before we get there, so just hold on tight for a while, okay? I can’t help you if you end up lost in that weird space.”

“Um...I don’t entirely understand what you’re saying... Do you think you could put it into simpler terms...? I’m not one of those fortune-tellers who trick people with spiritual jargon.”

It felt weird to have this spirit fortune-teller treating me like I was the fishy one.

“Sure. We’re jumping into the statue. It’s fine. It won’t hurt.”

“What?! Jumping into a statue would hurt! We might even get punished for it!”

I ignored Canimeow’s protests and leaped.

Next thing I knew, we were in the space with all those magic circles floating around us.

It never felt like I was standing on a real floor here, which was kind of unnerving... It was like flying down an escalator...

“Okay. You can let go now.”

Canimeow was staring in amazement. I guess it was surprising to see at first glance, even for a spirit.

Standing before us was Nintan.

I’d have felt pretty stupid if she’d been out today, so I was glad she was here.

“Ah, Azusa. Hello.” Nintan’s greeting was rather casual considering how she was a literal god, but her face immediately clouded over. Something was bothering her. “We must ask you to not bring third parties into Our home too often. We are not the type anyone may pop in and see.”

Ah, she thought I wasn’t taking her status seriously. I knew how that felt. I wouldn’t like it if someone found out I knew some gods personally and started bringing their friends over because of it.

“Just this once, then? For a special occasion. And she’s a spirit, so you can let this go, right?”

“Hmm, We understand. A spirit who has been born relatively recently.”

Gods were quick to catch up on this stuff.

Meanwhile, Canimeow was shaking in her boots. “Uh, I... Thank you...for...all your hard work...” She sounded like she was talking to her boss at her part-time job. Even spirits were frightened in the face of deities.

But Nintan’s expression started to darken even further. “What? The moon spirit? Another rare sort... What element are you...?”

Even the goddess was perplexed!

Still, if she could instantly tell this was the moon spirit, there was a possibility my idea would work.

“Nintan, Canimeow here is the moon spirit, but she’s frustrated because she has no powers that actually relate to the moon itself. So I want a way to get her there, if possible,” I said earnestly, staring right into Nintan’s eyes. I’d helped her once before, so I was sure she would cooperate.

“Well... To put this mildly, We doubt there is any way to get there...”

“Are we totally out of options now?!”

This was going to be much more difficult than I’d imagined...

“We know little about the moon—only that it is a sphere that orbits this world.”

“What?! Aren’t you a god?! Don’t you have control over logic?! Take her

there, at least for one second!" I grabbed Nintan's hand and vigorously shook it.

"We are not being stingy, nor are We unwilling! We do indeed intervene with natural laws here, but the moon is a separate world! It is beyond Our jurisdiction!"

A separate world? I guess...that made sense... It was an entirely different celestial body...

Wait, should I be backing down so quickly?

"Isn't there a moon god here, too? There's always a moon god and a sun god, right? Can't you ask them to do something about it?"

"We thoroughly believe that what is impossible is simply impossible, but... We can still confer with the moon god. Wait there."

Yes, sounded like she had connections. Good thing I brought it up.

The look on Canimeow's face was the most hopeful it had been so far.

Nintan turned away from us and opened some kind of communication line.

"Yes, it is We, Nintan. We have the moon spirit here, hoping to visit the moon. Is that possible? Mm-hmm, mm. Uh-huh. Right."

It sounded like she was on the phone.

About three minutes later, Nintan turned back to us with a smile.

Good news?

"The moon god has no idea how to reach the moon from here."

"No!"

"Consider it for one moment. If the sun god could bring the sun closer to our world, then the world would face destruction. No one has this power. No one can freely manipulate the celestial bodies."

She was saying something very similar to what I'd thought.

There was a sun goddess in Japanese mythology, but it wasn't like she could grab the sun and drop it on her enemies. She'd be way too OP.

"We came all this way and it's still a no... Agh, this hurts... I wish the moon

would just explode...” Canimeow fell to her knees. I did not hope the moon exploded, though—that would cause all kinds of problems.

“We cannot even imagine why you would want to go to the moon anyhow. Live here in this world. There is nothing to do on the moon. Truly nothing.”

I agreed with Nintan, but the doors would shut on this whole thing if I said that out loud.

“Look, people go the northernmost and southernmost spots in a country to celebrate things, right? So it’s a trip worth making for the same reasons, right?”

There were people who went all the way to Cape Soya, the northernmost part of Japan. Some people took the slow, local trains to the end of the line.

“We cannot empathize, so We do not understand. We would rather be safe and snug here in the temple. The any-most edge of anything sounds utterly inconvenient. We suppose such inconvenience is why it is at the fringes.”

And I agreed with her again, so I found it hard to persist.

But now that she’d contacted the moon god for us and confirmed that there was, indeed, no way to reach the moon, there was nothing else we could ask from her...

“Sorry for the trouble, Nintan. We’ll find another way.”

“I’m sorry for bothering you, Goddess...” Canimeow bowed deeply. I guess it was hard for her to be any kind of impolite to a deity. And she’d made the right choice if she didn’t want to get turned into a frog.

“Hmph... Do not act as though We have been of no help! What cannot be done cannot be done! You must endure this truth!”

“‘Enduring this truth’ would just mean it’s all over, so we’re going to keep working on this for a bit longer.”

“You will be asking Godly Godness, no? It will be very unpleasant if that second-rate deity were to solve this problem. Do not go to her.”

“That’s really selfish!”

But she’d also guessed my plan. I didn’t know any other gods anyway.

“Come on, each deity is different in their duties and position, so I’m just shopping around. It’s not a knock against you or anything.”

“Fine. But if you go to her, do not mention that We were unable to help you.”

She sure was hung up on the details for a god.

“You know so many deities, Azusa... Who are you? Are you, like, an evil minister who’s controlling a puppet king?”

“Why does this make me evil?”

I was doing all I could to help Canimeow, but she was being terrible to me!

“Ah, and moon spirit, you are forbidden from spreading word that the goddess Nintan was unable to help you. We will turn you into a frog if you do. You must absolutely not tell Godly Godness, especially.”

“A-all right, I won’t tell anyone!”

This goddess sure is self-centered...

But ultimately, Nintan’s efforts were for nothing.

“Hello, or good evening! It’s me, Godly Godness~”

Godly Godness had entered Nintan’s space!

“Gah! Do not come in unannounced! We do not recall inviting you here!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I am a goddess! And unlike you, someone who’s like a regional manager, I can reach even greater heights at corporate! You are hardly better than a regional manager! ...Even if I was demoted after too many mistakes and ended my streak of success.”

Was that meant to be arrogant or gloomy? Make up your mind.

“Who is this, now...?” Canimeow asked. “She doesn’t look that important.”

I know she doesn’t, but she is a god, trust me.

I gave the confused Canimeow a brief introduction to Godly Godness while the two deities were busy arguing.

“I heard everything, by the way! Honestly, you are so heartless for a goddess. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You shall become a frog.”

A blue-white light appeared in the goddess Nintan’s hands and struck Godly Godness—who was now a giant frog.

“Oh no! Now I’m a frog again, ribbit!”

“Come on, it’s ’cause you keep challenging her! It’s kind of your own fault!”

“You may hold a high position, Godly Godness, but you are wide open. Think about your actions as a frog.”

“A sergeant frog, perhaps?”

Please do not make jokes that only ex-Japanese people like me would understand.

She simply sat there, probably because she felt safe now that she wasn’t actually fighting in earnest with Nintan anymore. This was so weird...

“So, Azusa, is it true that your friend here wants to go to the moon?”

“Oh, so we’re starting our conversation while you’re still a frog...”

I didn’t think it would hurt her if she tried to be a little more conscious of her dignity. She and Nintan could at least share what each other had.

“Yes, Miss Frog! I want to do something that a moon spirit should do! That’s why I want to go!”

Since Godly Godness had been turned into a frog right after meeting Canimeow, Canimeow now saw her as a frog... At least this saved us the time of seeking her out ourselves.

Now, what was it going to be?

We were just going around and asking all the places we could.

If Godly Godness couldn’t take us to the moon, either, then our project was dead in the water.

“Well, I suppose you would ask, wouldn’t you~? I can use my power to take you to the moon.”

“Oh, you can!”

“Yes! Thank you so much, Miss Frog!”

Canimeow and I grabbed each other’s hands.

My plan to ask the gods was a success!

“Grrr... How unbearable it is to think that We have lost to her... She will pay for this embarrassment...” Nintan was angry, but hopefully, she’d relieve her stress by punching a wall or something.

“I was once a goddess who oversaw several realms of existence, you see~ Taking you to the moon would be a piece of cake! Easy peasy lemon squeezy cake!”

Enough with the cheesy jokes!

“Godly Godness, you know we’re talking about the moon in the sky, right?”

Personally, I wondered why the concepts of moon and sun here were completely compatible with those of my past life. Sometimes fantasy worlds had two moons.

“Strictly speaking, the celestial body you called the moon in your past life was a completely different object that happened to have the same name. It essentially refers to the most prominent object near this planet.”

By the way she put it, it sounded like Earth wasn’t going to be anywhere in this space.

“I can lift you up to the moon with my magic. You should be able to get there that way~”

Ooh! She was a space shuttle!

“Thank you, Azusa! This is all because of you!” Canimeow hugged me this time, her voice choked with emotion. It sounded like she was about to cry. “I didn’t think getting to the moon would be possible at all, but...you can do this for me... I don’t think I could ever repay you or Miss Frog...”

She still saw Godly Godness as a frog, but it wasn’t that big of a problem.

“Sure, Godly Godness and I were involved, but it all started with you, Canimeow. Your conviction turned the impossible into reality.”

Had she not yelled during our moon dinner, nothing would have happened.

Well, I was angry at Wynona for that cruel rant, but I was ultimately unable to argue with any of her objections. You could say it was all connected.

This all started when Canimeow declared she was going to the moon.

The moment you put something into words—that's when the possibilities are born. Even though neither of us built a spaceship ourselves, we were still overjoyed by the opportunity.

"It is quite irritating that We were unable to do anything, but We suppose We can be glad your problem is solved."

It sounded like Nintan was wishing us well.

"But We are still annoyed, so We shall keep her a frog for a while."

...Even if she was petty!

"Wow~ I can stick out my tongue so far! If I were human, I would most certainly be setting new records!"

Godly Godness was having a good time with her tongue.

"We may keep this frog around as amusement," commented Nintan. "There is no harm done."

"Looks like it..."

Even when she was demoted, she wasn't all that upset about it... She was very quick to get back up on her feet.

"By the way, Miss Frog, how are we getting to the moon?" Canimeow asked. She was ready to go at any second. With that level of obsession, she was most definitely the moon spirit.

"Well, I can shoot you straight into the sky with an incredible amount of magic. You will be able to reach the moon in one step." Godly Godness was so nonchalant about it, but what she was saying was almost literally out of this world.

"Incredible! You're so great, Miss Frog!"

"But there's one bit of a problem~"

I had a bad feeling about this. I mean, if Godly Godness was seeing a problem, it had to be something pretty big...

“What is it, Miss Frog? Does it use up too much mana?”

“Putting it metaphorically for you, moon spirit, when you go far, far up beyond the sky, you reach something like an energy layer.”

“Okay, okay. So we’ll travel past the energy layer, then.”

“The moment you enter that layer, you will be annihilated.”

See, that wasn’t a *bit of a* problem at all! That was leaving the atmosphere!

“She won’t be able to get to the moon, then, Godly Godness!”

“Ha-ha-ha, but there is a chance that you, the strongest being in this world, could break through~ I cannot recommend it, though.”

Not even being an OP witch could solve this one...

“Oh, and—I’m sure Azusa would understand this—once you enter what we call space without any protection...you will die.”

“Obviously!”

“I am not sure how a spirit’s physical body works, but the sum of it is, you would die. Does your body explode or something? Anyway, you won’t be able to breathe! Since you are a spirit, your consciousness might remain even if your body vanishes, but you won’t be able to return here!”

Don’t say it with such enthusiasm!

“Then you can’t make anything possible!”

“If I launch you with impossible speed toward the moon, at least one body part of yours will make it there! You will have arrived, physically! Tee-hee!”

She said all she did knowing it was impossible to begin with...

“Nintan, turn her into a frog.”

“She is already a frog. We cannot.”

I pinched the frog’s face and tugged in retaliation. “Ooh, you’re kind of slimy... And you can stretch so far.”

“Wow, this feels so weird~”

She didn’t regret her actions at all—she was just enjoying it even more. Handling someone this positive and chaotic was a real test of my patience.

“You can’t make a spaceship or anything?”

“No one on this planet has been to space, so there is no magic that relates to it at all. You may be the strongest creature on this planet, but you still cannot possibly be aware of what every creature in the world is doing. Your strength can only carry you so far.”

She was this close to lecturing me, but it wasn’t really registering since she was still a frog. Appearances mattered.

“And even if you managed to reach the moon, you would not be able to come back, just as I said. It would be an act of suicide. So let’s not, okay?”

“So going to the moon—”

“—is impossible, if you want to get there and return alive,” she said briskly.

I guess even gods had their limits.

“Back when I had a higher managerial position, I could have brought the moon to you, but that would destroy the world.”

“Yeah, leave it where it is, please!”

I wasn’t about to put the fate of the world on the scales.

“I said earlier that everything has its limits. But you could come up with a spell to create a life-form that could survive any temperature, any gravitational force, and any kind of radiation, transfer the moon spirit’s consciousness into that creature, and launch her to the moon.”

“That’s too much work; just let me live.”

I didn’t want to dive into the realm of mad science.

It was unfortunate, but when we came to the conclusion that it wasn’t possible, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my heart. There were many situations where it was important to persevere, but perseverance alone can only take you so far.

Like if a human did all the training they could possibly do, for example, they still wouldn't be able to travel through space without a suit. Everything had limits. It wasn't a terrible thing to know what you could and couldn't do.

But...it was kind of sad to see Canimeow staring blankly into space. "Thank you Azusa, Goddess Nintan, Miss Frog." She was smiling, but there was no life or energy about her.

She was like an athlete who had decided to retire. In a way, she seemed finally free of whatever demon had been possessing her—but she also kinda looked like a dried husk of a person.

"I feel at ease knowing it can't be done. I will continue to live life as the moon spirit."

Yeah, it was never possible.

Once again, I thought about how Wynona was right to object to her ambitions.

She was probably trying to offer a warning, that her cavalier promises might never be reconciled with reality.

If she hadn't, then Canimeow might've been even more hurt. If an adventurer overestimated their own abilities, that meant death. Canimeow's life probably hit too close to home for Wynona.

That said, it was still sad that there was nothing the moon spirit could do. I'd want to do the same thing in her shoes; that was who she was.

I wondered if there was something we could do to allow her to act like a moon spirit.

What had we done recently? There had to be a hint in there somewhere.

I thought back on the things we'd done lately.

...We've been attending a lot of festivals...

There was the meat festival and the sweets fair, and we'd had a lot of fun at both of those.

But a moon festival probably wasn't possible. There was no moon food or

anything, after all.

Hmm...but festivals and fairs didn't always have to have rows and rows of food stalls. That was just for food festivals—one type of event.

We should be able to do a different kind of festival—or fair, or whatever.

I wasn't a pro at this, so I wasn't exactly sure how much of this was going to be possible, but we'd still give it a shot in the meantime.

I clapped Canimeow on the shoulder. "I'm going to see if we can't hold a moon spirit festival. So save the moping for later, okay?"

"A festival? One where we can sing **Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon** ♪ **Moonmoonmoomoonmoon** ♪ together?"

"Wait, how would that be fun? ...No, maybe it could work...?" Her addition to my idea was a good one, I decided. "That's it, Canimeow! We can work off that!" I grasped both of Canimeow's hands.

"What? I think you're losing me..."

I wasn't going to tell her everything right now, or my plan might get a lukewarm reception. There were a lot of things I needed to nail down first.

"Ah, We see you are looking optimistic now. Very good, very good. That settles it."

Nintan, this is nowhere near settled.

But I still had the idea of going for a festival.

"Once you know your limits, that is when you can find ways to cross those boundaries. Like right now, for example, I think a tasty bug or two would truly hit the spot. Ribbit, ribbit!"

With an incredible spring in her legs, the frog *sproinged* into the distance.

"You nuisance! Do not test what a frog can do!"

"You cannot make me more of a frog than I already am! I am invincible, ribbit!"

Once I started making friends with gods, my desire to be faithful in any way

only lessened.

Godly Godness apparently lived as a frog for a little while after that. I heard she wrote a new scripture called the Book of Frog, but I haven't read it.



Canimeow and I parted ways for a bit, and I decided to quietly investigate the potential of my idea in the meantime.

There was the question of where we could have this thing, but first, I needed people to attend. Times like these, I usually flew to the demon lands.

I had connections with the demon king, so it was a lot easier to get things done there than in the human lands. If anything, we'd garner suspicion if we held any bizarre events closer to home...

After one concert, I headed to the dressing rooms. I had permission, of course.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by an energetic voice: "It's been such a long time, Azusa!"

"Bravo! That was a great concert, Kuku."

Kuku the almiraj was now a hugely popular singer here in the demon lands.

With a lute in her hand, she stirred the hearts of many demons—and some humans very sensitive to trends—by singing about life's bittersweet moments (though more bitter than sweet, in my opinion).

"You totally have the presence of a singer now. I could feel your aura the second I came into the room."

"Oh, don't flatter me. I'm still a small fish. The second I start trying to find a bigger pond, I won't be able to touch people's hearts with my music anymore."

She reminded me of small-time folk singers...

"My regular concerts aside, the only big job I've gotten is to make a theme song for a competition, so if my schedule works out, I should be able to help."

I wondered what kinds of competitions Kuku participated in—the demon world had so many.

“So, Kuku, there’s something I want to talk to you about. We have no concrete plans for this yet, so think of it as a blank slate. If you think it’s totally impossible, then it’d be a huge help if you just came out and told me so.”

The biggest thing about having a friend who was a pro was being able to hear a pro’s perspective.

I could think about it all I wanted, but I still would be limited by my own viewpoint.

Kuku took notes here and there as she earnestly listened to me talk. It was a huge honor just to have a popular singer take time out of her day for me.

“I think it should be possible. I will reach out to different minstrels; do you have the time to wait?”

“Sure. No harm in trying, right?”

Kuku, gloomy singer extraordinaire, nodded enthusiastically in response.

The results came to me faster than I imagined.

She had sent out contact wyverns all over the world, and her answer to my question was...yes, it was possible.

All that was left was to ask the moon spirit whether she was up for this plan.

I visited Lunar Guidance, the fortune-telling establishment she had set up in front of the main Misjantie Temple, after it closed for the day. Canimeow worked here as a fortune-teller.

“Oh, Azusa. I can tell your fortune for free.”

Canimeow’s work was over, and she was now eating dinner.

“Canimeow, I want to hold a moon spirit music festival. What do you think?”

“Azusa, did you get any strange signals from the moon? I wish that would happen to me.”

That wasn’t what I wanted her to be concerned about...

But when I told her the details, her reaction changed. At the very least, she paused in eating her dinner. Unfortunately, she seemed less happy and more bewildered.

“I think it’s an incredible idea, but I wonder if it will go well...”

“To be honest, we’re not going to know until we open that box. It might be a huge failure. All I can do is suggest the idea to you.”

Maybe it would be another no, much like going to the moon was.

“I’ll leave the final decision up to you. You can tell me anytime you—”

“I’ll do it,” she interrupted. “I don’t even need to use my divination. The moon’s telling me to do this. No, it’s not the moon—I want to do this! I want to make people acknowledge me as the moon spirit!”

There was a good fire going in her eyes.

It was nice to lead a relaxing life, but it wasn’t terrible to find something to get you on your feet.

Moon spirit music festival, here we go!



When the winter chill grew stronger, there was a poster that hung in concert halls all over.

Personally, I was getting some sketchy vibes from this.

But we got a demon designer who did all of Kuku’s advertising posters to make it, so I’d trust it was okay... I guess it was good enough for the people coming to the concert.

I didn’t know any of the minstrels, but according to Flatorte, “It’s a good range of veterans to new hopefuls, so it’s not too bad,” so I was also going to trust her judgment.

MOON SPIRIT MUSIC FESTIVAL



One day, Canimeow, fortune-teller at Lunar Guidance, received an oracle from the moon spirit, who said: “Gather all singers and musicians related to the moon and hold a party. Offer this to me, the moon spirit.”

That day, the message from the moon became clear!

A new legend will be born!

WHERE:

The field on the outskirts of the royal capital

WHEN:

Night of the full moon
in the fourth month



★ Featured Musicians★



Kuku
The Moonsea Ensemble
Moon Soldiers
Lycanthrope Orchestra
The Ocean on the Moon
Crescent Baron
Canimeow, Divinator and
Receiver of Oracles
and more...

Hosted by Siren Entertainment & Demon First Music.
Contact us for questions.

Not that I had anything else to go on...

I hopped on Flatorte, and once we had permission, we went around putting the posters up on notice boards around the land.

“We’re trying to make this a large-scale event, but if only three people show

up, Canimeow will only get even more upset... And that'd defeat the purpose."

As the number of posters in our stack lessened, I was starting to get nervous.

"There's no need to worry, Mistress. All of these minstrels are talented individuals with deep connections to the moon. People will come." Flatorte knew a whole lot about music. "It's good that our concept is the moon, because that means it's not limited to only one genre. There are plenty of minstrels out there who have *moon* in their name, you see."

"I do get the impression that a lot of minstrels name themselves after stars and stuff."

"If we went with the concept of blood, then our festival would bring in all the death-style minstrels."

"I'm really glad Canimeow's not the blood spirit..."

If she were, she'd just be a demon at that point.

"There are a lot of events for death-style minstrels, and they're pretty fun for what they are. You'll have to practice your headbanging beforehand; otherwise, you'll hurt yourself."

"There sure are a lot of conflicts out there in the world that I don't know about..."

"That said, if a lot of flower-style minstrels show up, then fights might break out between fans that listen purely to death style and fans of flower style. It's very hard to find the balance between the two, Mistress."

"I know I asked, but I don't understand at all."

At some point, this had become an in-depth lecture on the intricacies of the minstrel world.

"A long time ago, when minstrels were first starting to rise in prominence, they say there were only metallic-style and puncture-style musicians. This is an era of eons past that is only known through legends, though."

Wait, was that supposed to be metal and punk...?

"Legend has it that their fans fought every day. People with good sense

deemed both as a terrible influence.”

“Minstrels were for delinquents?!”

I thought they were something more refined, but I was way off.

“You know we’re talking about wandering minstrels, right? The ones who served nobility are a completely different story. People feared the minstrels who wandered the country and started guerilla performances in the busy downtown areas. Things are much more peaceful than they were then. Wandering minstrels have now also established a proper business for themselves.”

It really just sounded like the regular music industry.

“In this concert, we have Moon Soldiers, the main contenders for streetwear style, and Lycanthrope Orchestra, considered part of the costumed type within overkill style. There are people who think of it the same as flower style, but the musicality of costumed types leans toward crime type...”

“Oh, I’m not interested in the jargon talk, thanks.”

I remember having the same thought last time—there were way too many subgenres. It was almost impossible to follow.

“Their broad appeal brings in all types of different fans, but I hear nowadays that fans don’t start fights, break venues, or sneak in knives to performances. It should be all right.”

“I hope there’s no fighting at the concert... That would be a big problem for the company Kuku is a part of...”

There was no way either Canimeow or I would be able to run this event, so Siren Entertainment, the minstrel company that Kuku worked with, was helping us. There were wandering minstrels in the demon lands, but there were also singers who performed in halls.

“There really seem to be a lot of demon minstrels, but Kuku’s music is being spread through the magic streams. I think things will work out for her.”

“Oh yeah, the magic streams were a thing...”

It was this YouTuber thing that was causing info about the demons to catch

on with a small subset of very sensitive people in the kingdom. Kuku's music was spreading that way, too.

"You've made me feel a lot better, Flatorte. I think we'll get a lot of guests."

"Of course. That won't be a problem at all. I'm sure plenty of people would love to see this."

I didn't know left from right in this industry, so this was a relief.

"The only problem remaining is the weather on the day, but we can only rely on luck for that," commented Flatorte.

Oh no! Another thing to worry about!

"The Ocean on the Moon, especially, has been called the minstrel who summons storms, and they say a big storm blew away the set at a performance for an audience of ten thousand or so. But I suppose it's not an awful thing to perform before a ruin."

"I don't think I want a storm at this festival!"

"Oh, that incident was nothing. Big music festivals always come with trouble. You hear all kinds of stories about minstrels who held their events in a valley, which caused a huge carriage traffic jam and took two whole days until the whole audience was gone, or the minstrel who started the concert four hours late, which meant the concert ended after the carriages stopped running for the day and nobody could go home."

All these minstrels were troublemakers.

But the weather was still important, considering this was an outside event...

Afterward, I went to visit Misjantie. "Ask the wind spirits to keep the clouds out of the venue area, please! Make sure they get the rain clouds through well before it starts!"

"I dunno; this is kinda sudden, man! The wind spirits like spreading rumors more than controlling wind..."

I really hoped they had some ability to affect the weather, at least.

"Just ask, please! We need to be able to see the moon!"

I was getting more and more pushy. I'd use all the demon and spirit and god help I could get.

The day of the moon spirit festival was slowly closing in on us.

Since I'd gotten myself involved, I'd sometimes pop in and check in on Canimeow.

Canimeow herself looked very well-collected, and she confirmed with me the order of things. Even though she wasn't going to reveal herself as the moon spirit, she still had to play the part of a fortune-teller who had received an oracle.

"Yes, I can do it. I can do this..."

"Yes, make sure everyone knows you exist."

Everyone was doing all they could. All that was left was to enjoy the show!



Finally, at long last, the day of the music festival arrived.

The sun was barely up, and there was already a massive sea of people outside the venue! Anyone passing by would wonder what all the buzz was about. And the sky was a cloudless blue!

"Yes, this is gonna be great!"

"I kept my head and knees glued to the floor when I talked to the wind spirits, man... I had to give 'em so much gossip..."

Oops—hope Misjantie didn't suffer too much.

"They told me to leak any famous people weddings that'd be happening at the shrine..."

"That's a huge violation of your work ethics, right...?"

The wind spirits sounded like a huge pain in the neck. It was like the neighborhood gossip lady cranked all the way up.

"Putting the wind spirits aside for now... You want this event to be a success, too. Right, Misjantie?"

"Canimeow is helping Misjantie Temple get even more visitors, man."

Well, they *were* spirit friends.

“Once Canimeow’s popular, I know my temple’s gonna be full of traffic, man!”

Don’t bring up money; you’re ruining the fantasy.

In the afternoon, the festival began.

The first act to come onstage was a veteran minstrel group.

The minstrel names and songs all had something to do with the moon.

I was listening from backstage, but I could still hear the loud cheers from passionate fans out in the crowd.

Flatorte was also backstage with me, explaining. “We have several popular minstrels coming out right at the start. The audience is going to get excited about this, no matter what.”

“You can talk all you like today, Flatorte. Don’t leave me all by my lonesome.”

There was some work I had to take care of anyway. I had to be the manager for the moon spirit herself.

Canimeow had her eyes covered by a big hooded robe, which really contributed to the mysterious fortune-teller vibe.

But I could tell by the trembling in her lips just how nervous she was.

Of course—there were thousands of people out there waiting for her, and it wasn’t like any of them were personal fans of hers, so she was basically the away team at this event.

This was a risky scheme—the main act of this event was wholly unknown (and not even a minstrel). But that was precisely why we were able to gather such a diverse group of musicians at all.

“Ooh...I can already feel the pressure... I think I’d explode if all those thousands of people looked at me like *Who is this person...?*”

“This is way easier than going to the moon, so chin up!” I pushed her forward. “You can do this! Go!”

Canimeow briefly cleared her throat, then stepped onto the stage.

The whole venue fell quiet. People were probably wondering who she was; nobody in this audience would start cheering if they heard her name.

“Uh, ummm... Greetings, all. I am Canimeow, a fortune-teller. I decided to hold this festival when I received an oracle from the moon spirit.”

Now that the audience knew who she was, they were watching her carefully.

“I shall now sing the song I received alongside the oracle. Once you know how it goes, I ask you all to sing along with me.”

And then, in front of literally thousands of people, she started belting out that weird song.

**“Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmoon ♪
The full moon, the half-moon, the crescent, all kinds of moons~
♪ But the moon stays perfectly round all the time~ ♪ How strange
is that~ ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪”**

Yeah... No matter how many times I hear it, it just sounds like a joke to me...

The audience stared blankly at her.

Anyone who praised her for this would be very weird.

But Canimeow had a strong heart—she didn’t stop until she got to the end.

“...Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪”

Without faltering, she started the second round.

This time, she was accompanied by the lutes and other instruments of the minstrels on the stage.

And the members of those groups who sang joined in with **“Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon ♪”**

They sure were professionals. Her ridiculous song was starting to sound dignified and majestic.

““Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~

Moomoonmoooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪""

Oooh, it was getting inspirational.

Flatorte had started singing, too.

Despite the bizarre lyrics, it was slowly starting to sound more and more epic. By the third round, the audience started joining in as well.

""""Lunaluna~ Moomoonmoooooon ♪ Lunaluna~

Moomoonmoooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪""""

Incredible! It wasn't supposed to be a song that inspired feelings of togetherness, but the whole venue was singing as one. On the fourth and fifth rounds, the entire audience was singing parts of the chorus together.

"Today, you will keep your spirits high and praise the moon spirit. That is your mission here."

When Canimeow stepped off the stage, there came loud cheers and applause. I even heard people yelling, "Long live the moon spirit!"

"The opening went very well. That was a superb beginning." Flatorte was nodding with her arms crossed, so it sounded like we were off on the right foot.

But when Canimeow came back, she was barely staying upright.

"Whoa, why are you so worn out?! Did someone get you with psychic damage?!"

"Ah...I was so scared... I think that's the most scared I've been in my life... There were so many people, staying calm took all the energy out of me..."

It was normal for a fortune-teller to conduct business one-on-one, after all.

"You won't be on again for a while, Canimeow. Rest up."

The name of the moon spirit was going to spread all across the land.

Afterward, several minstrels came onstage and performed according to the schedule, and the air got even more electric.

There was apparently no precedent for an event attended by both human and demon musicians, so we'd drawn a lot of people in with that alone.

I also heard some people yelling, "I'm so glad we got to see them live!"

When Kuku came onstage, the atmosphere changed again.

One reason probably was because her music wasn't the kind to get people worked up, but everyone wanted to pay close attention to her singing.

"I see Kuku has more human fans now, too." Flatorte seemed really happy about that. "She can captivate the audience at any stage she plays on. She now has the skill to paint the air with her own color."

"She's like your apprentice in a way, Flatorte."

"That's an exaggeration, Mistress. She is much, much more musical than I am."

A surprisingly modest admission from Flatorte, even if we weren't talking about raw strength. This was a miracle. I hoped this didn't mean a storm was coming.

Geez, a storm would be dreadful right now... Please, just let this event pass peacefully...

"Please, just let me frown~ ♪ I can't keep on smiling anymore. If I start smiling again, you'll never see how sad I've been, and it'll all be just like it was before~ ♪"

I could sense just how convincing Kuku's music was, even though it was super dark...

"It's a nice song, but it sucks for whoever's up after her. The energy here feels like molasses."

"You're right! This wasn't the right song for a festival!"

The vibes had been reset to zero.

"But it is what it is. If a minstrel can't affect the mood set by a previous performer, that shows the limit of their skills. Minstrels must win through song alone. A festival is another type of battle."

When Flatorte was explaining music to me, I almost started to think she was smart.

“There are minstrels who thrive at festivals and minstrels whose strengths lie elsewhere. Some minstrels aren’t suited for these open stages.”

“The musical world really is complicated...”

“But I’m sure Kuku has something for a festival today. Don’t worry,” Flatorte said quietly. I had no idea what that meant.

Once her performance was over, Kuku calmly returned to the backstage area. “It feels strange performing in front of humans. This should feel like home, but now I feel much more comfortable in the Vanzeld Castle town.”

The expression on her face told me she was a total big shot now. After she made a name for herself, she had come to accept any situation as normal.

“You’ve improved so much, Kuku. All I could think about was how amazing you were.”

“I am who I am today because you helped me back then, Azusa. I can never thank you enough,” she said with a smile.

Back when Kuku used the name Schifanoia, wore gaudy makeup, and screamed all her songs, her work was never enough for her to even eat, so she had collapsed right before our eyes.

“It’s no big deal—it’s your own strength that helped you become such an amazing minstrel, Kuku.”

“I am happy to hear that, but I didn’t make it this far on my own. You have my thanks.”

I had a feeling she’d repaid our kindness in a wonderful way.

Way back when, Nosonia had a really...unique way of repaying the kindness I showed her before...

That aside, Kuku and Flatorte didn’t do much talking with each other.

“Keep it up.”

“I will.”

That was it. Watching them, all I could think about was how cool they looked.

I guess that meant they had nothing to chat about. I almost wanted to be like

them.

Canimeow, by the way, thanked every minstrel act as they stepped off the stage at the end of their performances. She didn't have much else to do in her position.

The human minstrels who didn't know who Canimeow really was said to her, "I bet the moon spirit is really happy about this."

"Yes, I believe so, too."

She seemed a bit surprised at first, but her reply was firm. Not even a god could pull off an event like this. It was safe to say that she had done more than enough to spread awareness of her existence.

The event proceeded, and night eventually fell—and we could see a perfectly full moon overhead.

The concert was finally winding down.

Standing onstage was a minstrel who, according to Flatorte, played in the death style.

"So similar to Kuku's old style of music, then? She was death-style, right?"

"Yes. Their skill levels are worlds apart, however. See how everyone is shaking their heads around? The more they do that, the higher-quality death it is."

That's a weird standard.

"Music is not only for listening and appreciating. Some music is meant to get your blood flowing and set your soul on fire."

"I see... You're very helpful, Flatorte."

And she was right—the fans were going wild along with the intense music onstage.

"I'm worried someone might get hurt... Are you sure they'll be okay?"

"The ones near the front are seasoned fans, so they get surprisingly few injuries. Some should have hired adventurers specializing in restorative magic as their relief squad."

I couldn't tell exactly how many songs had gone by so far, but I bet the

audience knew.

But then, once their performance was over, the death-style minstrels yelled something I wasn't expecting.

"We've got a surprise act for you next!"

Wait, did we have something like that on the schedule?

"You-know-who's coming back from the dead!!!"

Then somebody stepped up onto the stage. I knew that makeup—and those bunny ears.

"Hey, that's Kuku in her old makeup!"

**"BLACK AND WHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITE, WOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAA
H! AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH! PUT THEM TOGETHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEER
RRRRRRRRRRRRRRR, YOU GET GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!
ADD MORE BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK,
MAKES IT GRAYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEER!!"**

This was one of her Schifanoia songs!

She was playing her lute like an electric guitar!

**"THE GRAAAAAAAAAAAAY! DIAMOOOOOOOOOOND! BAAAAAATHES IN
THE LIGHT OF THE MOOOOOOOOOOON! THE DIAMOOOOOOOOOOND! IS
A RAINBOOOOOOOOOOOOW!"**

She even made sure the song had something to do with the moon!

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! It's me, Schifanoia! Maybe I *will* celebrate this moon spirit with my songs! Y'know, they say some of us almiraj came from the moon!"

That's right! They're the rabbits that came from the moon!

"Ugh, what was up with that Kuku chick—what a hack, am I right? Crying over that emo junk is for losers! Every tragedy is a party with Schifanoia! Next up is 'Blood-Soaked Moon'!"

Even though more than half of the people here had never heard the song before, they were still headbanging.

"Sorry, but did Kuku have this many fans when she was Schifanoia?"

To answer my own question, she definitely didn't.

But I doubted anyone here had known that Schifanoia would be coming. People couldn't even come to see Schifanoia without Kuku.

“Schifanoia today is much more expressive in her language after going through the Kuku experience. That’s why the audience can get into her music,” Flatorte explained, satisfied. “Now that she can revisit her origins, that means she is no longer afraid.”

I was lucky that I could see this new side of Flatorte, all because Kuku was around.

**"DESPAIR! IS BORN! ON THE MOON, ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON!
WOOOAAAAAAH! AAAAAAAAAAAA! ROOOOAAAAR! THE MOON PUTS YOU ALL
INTO CONFUSION! INTO A HORDE OF MINDLESS UNDEAD!
WOoooooooooooooAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"**

But the song was still pretty bad!

“Though she’s more expressive in her language, she still has further to go musically.”

“You sure are calm when it comes to this, Flatorte...”

“She never had a hit because her musicianship was too weak.”

Well, the more someone passionately supports a work, the more objectively vitriolic they are about the quality.

“I’ll come back as many times as you fools want!” Schifanoia yelled and leaped off the stage. I doubted that number would be any higher than zero.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well? Did you desire blood? Did you feel the massacre impulse? Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hey, we’re backstage already, so you can act normally.”

"Say that to me again and I'll shred your guuuuuuuts!"

“Seriously, I’m not interested in the act, so just be normal.”

It was exhausting talking to someone with that kind of energy.

“...All right. My apologies.” Normal Kuku was back. “I could hurt my throat

singing that way...”

That would be a fatal blow to a minstrel.

“The quality of one’s singing isn’t a big factor in death style, after all. Some even think that the lute melody serves as a standin for actual singing.”

“Yes... I will put that performance away for a little bit now...”

I didn’t think Schifanoia’s one-day revival was going to go down as legend.

“I believe I did a good job leading the moon spirit’s entrance, though.” Kuku smiled in her dramatic makeup.

Right, the next act was going to be the last.

Canimeow the fortune-teller, whose name was listed among the minstrels, appeared onstage.

“I received another oracle from the moon spirit. It said, *Today was a wonderful day. From now on, I will speak to you all through these music festivals. Wait for that time.*”

A kind of cry erupted throughout the audience.

“Then one last time, let us sing the ode to the moon spirit!”

Everyone at the concert started singing that stupid song.

““““Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ””””

Canimeow raised her hand and pointed at the moon.

“More! Let the moon herself hear us! More, more!”

Finally, the minstrels who’d performed that day joined in one after the other, all singing the same song, until the stage was buried in people.

“Come on, louder! It’s not going to reach the moon like that! I know you can do more! Sing to the moon!”

At some point, Schifanoia, who had just performed onstage, joined in the singing.

And for some reason, Flatorte pulled me up onto the stage, too.

**“““Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Moonmoonmoomoonmoon 🎵”””**

It was still an inelegant and stupid song, but everyone was singing it seriously.

Some of the performers were even crying.

And eventually, Canimeow started bawling.



“Thank you! You have touched every part of the moon spirit’s soul! You are all perfect! Even if the moon isn’t looking at you, her spirit is always watching over you!”

It was safe to say those were happy tears; I couldn’t imagine any other reason she’d be crying.

“Nobody from this world has ever gone to the moon. But all of you here are now connected to the moon! I guarantee it!”

Onstage, I pulled Canimeow in her fortune-teller getup into a big hug. “I’m glad, I’m so glad.”

“Thank you, Azusa... This became a fantastic memory... I can now live proudly knowing I’m the moon spirit...”

Yeah, no other spirits held events like this. Canimeow was a spirit with unbeatable originality.

“This is where I’ve always wanted to be. This place is so much better than the moon!”

And thus ended the hugely successful first moon spirit music festival.



But a few days later, Canimeow came to the house in the highlands again.

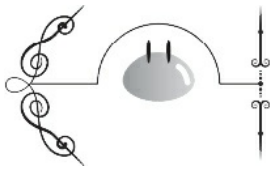
“So if we have enough recruits, then I’d want to hold it again next year. Could you help?”

“I’m not an event planning company!”

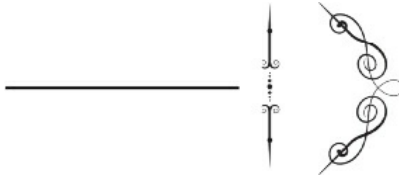
“But I heard that for something this big, you have to start preparing a year in advance. You have to secure the venue and stuff.”

“I told you, I’m not an event planning company—I don’t know this stuff!”

I had her handle next year’s (and all years after that) by herself.



TRYING A DAY OFF, DEMON-STYLE



Beelzebub's insistence about bringing the girls to the demon lands was getting annoying, so the whole family decided to go to the town around Vanzeld Castle.

I also brought along Wynona, by the way, as a special guest.

"Wow... Demon towns are so developed..." Wynona the adventurer was simply shocked.

"I was surprised when I first came, too. There are some eerie-looking storefronts here and there, but it's peaceful here. Almost carefree."

"Mm, Stepmother, could you please be a bit less motherly?" Wynona objected.

"Well, I might be your *step*mother, but I'm still your mother, which means I have the right to be motherly!"

She was way too strict with me. I wished she were a bit sweeter and easier to understand. But the fact that she'd come along at all was a huge step.

"The candy shop over there is really good!"

"Miss Beelzebub often buys us gifts from there."

"Is that so, Sisters? I would like to visit, then."

She was obviously much closer to Falfa and Shalsha... She was so salty to me...

Then, I wondered what would happen if you sprinkled salt on a slime. Would they shrivel up like a slug?

But both Falfa and Shalsha ate salty foods with no trouble; I guess slime spirits

were different. They wouldn't be the same as regular ol' slimes on the ground. Maybe I'd try it on one of the neighborhood slimes next time...

Wynona seemed to thoroughly enjoy our stroll around the city, which I was glad for.

And since Falfa and Shalsha mostly took charge of showing her around, I could put my mind at ease and do shopping in other stores. I think Wynona was being a good influence on them.

When we ended our stroll around the city, the family and I went to Beelzebub's manor.

"You are late! You were to arrive early in the morning! Are you taking the girls from me?!"

"Quit talking like these are *your* daughters!"

Beelzebub was getting way pushier than before. *I hope she knows I'm doing this entirely out of the goodness of my heart!*

And I also wanted to introduce her to Wynona, since she was a slime spirit, too.

"Hello, my name is Margrave Wynona of Idell..." Wynona shrank a bit when she met Beelzebub.

"I see, I see. Azusa has told me about you. Well, I hope you relax today."

Beelzebub would never dismiss Wynona as a daughter because she was taller than the others. She was going to treat her courteously.

"Since you are Falfa and Shalsha's younger sister, you are essentially my daughter. Make yourself at home."

"Hey! What the heck is that logic?!"

It really felt like Beelzebub was going to walk away with my daughters. Yikes!

"Indeed. I would not be who I am today without my sisters."

"Don't just accept it, Wynona!"

Rrrgh... If Beelzebub and Wynona end up working together...

“Now, Miss Beelzebub. Please take me to your whitest room.”

“What is this you speak of?”

“I find the most peace in rooms with white decor.”

I was used to her shenanigans by now, but Beelzebub’s odd expression was the typical response to this.

“I have no white room. I do have a black obsidian room, though.”

So she has a black room... Very demon-like.

“Well, I’ll leave the girls with you. I’ll go back to my shopping.”

“Aye, shop for as many days as you please. The five of us shall have a wonderful time together.”

When she said “five,” she was also counting Sandra.

“I’m not going to be shopping for that long. Wait... Where’d Sandra go?”

Sandra had vanished—I was absolutely sure she’d been with us when we got to Beelzebub’s manor, though.

“Sandra has buried herself in front of the garden.”

I looked out the window to find her body submerged in the dirt, relaxing like someone enjoying a nice hot bath.

“Right, I guess you could say that this is her hometown.”

“It seems so. I see no problem here, so you may go to into the city or to the ends of the earth or the moon for all I care.”

“We actually had plans to go to the moon, but we gave up on that.”

Spending time with the girls seemed to bring Beelzebub some peace of mind, so I decided not to bother her so much. I wanted her to think of it as my gracious gift to her.

“Ah yes, Fighsly has opened a training gym. ’Twould be nice to take a peek if you have the time.”

“She has, huh? This just smells like a moneymaking scheme, though.”

Meanwhile, the two dragons reacted at the word *gym*.

“Let us go to the gym, Lady Azusa!”

“I want to spar! I want to grind the gym to smithereens!”

I really hoped she didn’t break the gym first thing—that would just be mean-spirited. Fighsly wasn’t running a gym because she wanted to taste defeat or meet people who were stronger than she was.

But I didn’t have anything else I needed to do, so maybe it’d be nice if we stopped by.

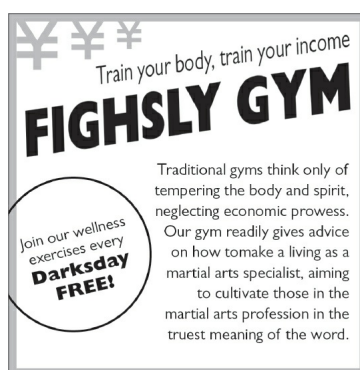
“Sure, we’ll head straight over.”

The dragons and I made our way over to where Fighsly’s gym was.

Meanwhile, Halkara and Rosalie weren’t particularly interested, so they went on their own into the city. I was confident they knew the streets by now, so I wasn’t worried.

We found the gym immediately. We could see the sign from far away.

“Another weird sign, I see.”



This world tended to have too much information on its signs.

But on the inside, it was all normal—there were demons punching sandbags that hung from the ceiling or demons wearing protective gear and practicing receiving kicks. The place seemed legit.

“Oh! Everyone is training so earnestly! I wish to spar with them!”

“I wanna destroy this gym! I want to battle!”

“Laika, Flatorte, please don’t start too many fights...”

Also, I spotted a framed print of the phrase *Money is not vulgar*. It wasn’t wrong, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Her obsession with money was almost pure and respectable, considering how consistent she was with it...

Both Laika and Flatorte donned some practice gear and started training, so I headed farther into the building by myself. I was hoping to say hello to the master of the gym.

At the end of the hall, there was a room with a plaque that read CEO. I wasn't sure if I'd call her a CEO, but this was probably what I was looking for.

"Are you in, Fighsly?" I called as I knocked.

"I know that voice—is that Azusa? Yeah, I'm here."

I was right, so I opened the door. There, I found Fighsly and...a slime, cradled in her arms.

What's the deal here...?

I couldn't suss out an answer, so I had to ask.

"Hey, Fighsly, what's with the slime? It's not your kid or anything, right?"

Fighsly wasn't a slime spirit like Falfa and Shalsha, but an actual, genuine slime, so maybe she could produce baby slimes. Although I always imagined slimes splitting off to make more of themselves.

"Ha-ha-ha~ This isn't my child~ This is a slime I picked up off the street."

The way she described the slime wasn't the kindest, but she was still cradling it gently.

"Why are you hugging the slime? Is it one of the rules of your gym? Like, *One must not kill slimes?*"

"No, our five rules are: 'If it looks too good to be true, it probably is.' 'No money, no life.' 'A full wallet, a full heart.' 'Anyone who asks to see your bond is looking to scam you.' 'When you lend money to a friend, be prepared to lose both.'"

"They're all money-related!"

None of them were particularly wrong, but in my opinion, rules that were more spirit-oriented would fit a gym better. Or maybe this was the type of gym

that didn't use philosophical phrases to temper body and soul, and did science-based training instead?

"I found this slime in front of the gym the other day. It wasn't bothering anyone. I left it alone, but it stayed there for a week, and...I think you just grew accustomed to me, didn't you?" Fighsly stroked the slime.

Slimes didn't meow like cats, so it didn't react or anything—it just *blubbed* in place. I had a feeling it had more water content than the slimes in the highlands.

"Did you start keeping it as a pet, then?"

"Ha-ha-ha~ Martial artists don't keep pets~ Too much work when you want to travel." Fighsly laughed at my idea, still stroking the slime. "This slime isn't a pet. It's just a little attached to me, that's all."

Well, nebulous definition of *pet* notwithstanding, it was fact that Fighsly had taken a liking to it.

"It probably got attached to me because I was a slime once, too. It was starting to look lonely, so I let it in. That's all."

Fighsly gave the slime a little smack. She wasn't attacking it, of course (it would turn into a magic stone if so), but that probably counted more as playing.

Why was this so touching?

I could feel my heart warming at this precious little scene.

Was this that thing where you catch a rough kid feeding a kitten some milk and your heart totally explodes?!

I thought Fighsly would only ever think about money, but now that I caught sight of her giving love to a common slime, the sheer difference in attitude made her seem almost kind.

"Slimes don't ever randomly decide to stay in one place, you see, but this one decided to stay in front of the gym. So even when I keep it like this, it won't go anywhere— Hey, Azusa, why are your eyes watering?"

"Gosh, I was just thinking...even misers have hearts..."

“Please don’t call me a miser to my face!”

Yeah, maybe that was a harsh choice of words.

“I also don’t want any pets since they cost money, but slimes don’t cost a single koinne.”

“Oh, yep, that’s you all right.” I bet she wouldn’t have even let in a cat.

“But it is true that looking at it gives me peace of mind. The whole process of getting this gym built was so stressful, I didn’t have time to rest.”

“So it heals you.”

“No matter how much you pay, contractors will always give you a building full of defects, or say their company went bankrupt and then run away. It was the worst, to put it lightly.”

“Your stinginess affected this, too?!”

“My heart softened, and I forgot my mantra: People will betray you, but money never will. I tried to keep it cheap, but then the people betrayed me. I am a failure of a martial artist.”

“I’m pretty sure that has nothing to do with the martial arts.”

She was starting on the money-related proverbs.

“But I believe we’re on track now. I have eight people in my thrice-a-week course, fourteen people in my twice-a-week course, and ten in my once-a-week course.”

“Can’t you just say you have thirty-two pupils?! You’re calculating this through money, aren’t you?!”

I shouldn’t have been as touched as I was before. Fighsly was still Fighsly.

But I’d never seen a slime as a pet in my life. I killed a few of them every day, so of course I had a hard time seeing them any other way.

Imagine keeping a slime as a pet while I went out and killed twenty neighborhood slimes a day... Frightening stuff.

“Hey, Fighsly? Does it have a name?”

“Free Tuition.”

I almost wished it didn’t have a name at all.

“Do you think I could hold it?” I stepped forward toward Fighsly.

“Oh, sure. It’s not a pet, just a slime I picked up off the ground, so do as you please.”

She was being surprisingly stubborn when it came to this. I guess acknowledging it was her pet went against her mottoes or whatever. But when I got closer, the slime (excuse me, Free Tuition) started shaking violently.

“Hmm? Is it scared of me...?”

I guess it had to be... I’d killed innumerable slimes, so...I held the world record of slime killing...

Maybe even slimes—or maybe especially slimes—knew through instinct. When Fighsly and I first met, she was terrified of me... She knew how many of her kind I’d killed.

“It’s all right, Free Tuition, nothing to be scared of. I won’t hurt you so long as you don’t fight back...”

“You sound like a mugger, Azusa.”

“Oh, y-you’re right. Uhhh... D-don’t move!”

“Still sounds like a mugging!”

My body’s instinct was to kill slimes!

The slime’s shivering was getting worse and worse.

Boooiing!

The slime leaped energetically from Fighsly’s arms—and out through the open window!

“What?! It escaped...?”

“Hey! Free Tuition! Free Tuition!”

It *definitely* wasn’t a good name, but now wasn’t the time to be thinking about that.

It was my fault that her pet (or whatever) ran away...

“Sorry, Fighsly! I’ll chase after it!” I leaped out of the window after Free Tuition.

“Oh! No need to look too hard!”

“It’s okay! Slimes don’t go very fast, so I’ll find it right away!”

Maybe *find* was the wrong word here. I just had to grab it from beneath the window. I knew a lot about slimes.

“You won’t! There’s water outside the window!”

“—What?”

I looked down to find a little river beneath me.

Oh, I’m not going to cast my flight magic in time...

With a big splash, I landed on my butt in the water. “Oooh... Shoulda looked before I leaped there...”

I didn’t care too much about getting wet, but...Free Tuition was nowhere to be seen.

Oh no, did it flow down the waterway? The water could whisk away small, light things like slimes.

“This is worse than I thought!” I rolled up my long skirt and raced down the creek.

I think this was the first time I’d been so hung up over a single regular slime.

The silver lining here was that the waterway was clean, apparently used for chilling vegetables and stuff, so the water was cool.

There was an embankment on the other side where the houses were, with stairs at periodic intervals leading down to the water.

The current wasn’t flowing very fast, so I thought I would find Free Tuition right away, but another problem soon arose.

“It sure is hard to spot slimes in the water...”

The transparent slimes were so well camouflaged here that it was hard to tell

where they were. And the worst part of this was that Free Tuition wasn't pink or green, but a light blue. That was the color that would be hardest to find in the river.

Had slimes evolved to protect themselves in the water? No, it had to be a coincidence. They lived away from water, too, and they came in more colors than just light blue.

If I ran too fast, I might pass it by without realizing or end up stepping on it somehow.

"This is an actual pain..."

I widened my eyes as big as I could and carefully searched for the slime. I would've created a spell that could highlight slimes or something if I knew this would happen... But who would think to develop a spell they'd have no use for normally...?

I walked down the waterway, splashing with every step.

"I wonder if they can breathe in the water... Is breathing even a thing they do...? This is starting to make me nervous..."

I can't believe I discovered a new weak point of mine. Even though I was the most powerful person skills-wise, I was still far from being an all-powerful, all-knowing being.

I'd decided I was going to do all I could to live an unassuming life. Without that effort, I'd probably end up stepping off my path. People rarely failed when they knowingly boasted about themselves, but they did make mistakes once that attitude unconsciously transformed into vanity.

At last, I felt something soft and squishy make contact with my foot.

Startled, I picked it up.

In my hands was the slime, Free Tuition!

"Gotchaaa!"

I raised a victorious cry.

But the slime tried to wriggle out of my grasp—and succeeded, thanks to the

fact that it was wet.

Gah! Catching slimes was seriously difficult! They'd get squished if I held too hard, too...

But then, Fighsly appeared on the path along the waterway's embankment.

I guess she'd come around from the front of the gym.

"Free Tuition! I'm over here!" She reached out.

Free Tuition shivered in my arms, then leaped up toward Fighsly, having finally found its owner.

What a dramatic reunion!

Fighsly was giving so much love to the slime, and the slime was responding in kind!

But at that same moment, something strange happened.

One slime after another started hopping out from the water, three in total. They were all light blue.

All three of them—

Boooiiing.

Boooiiing!

Boooooooooiiiiiiiing!

—leaped right at Fighsly at once!

"Oh, whoa, whoa!"

Fighsly deftly caught the one I'd been chasing with her head, then caught the other three with her hands and her back. Her movements were so smooth, like a real pro martial artist.

As a result, Fighsly ended up covered in four slimes, one of them being Free Tuition.

"...Slimes can live in the water, too, y'know."

"I didn't know that..."

I'd had no idea slimes were amphibious... But I guess they were supposed to live everywhere.

There was also one thing I had to know.

"Fighsly, which one of these slimes is Free Tuition? Is it possible it wasn't the first one I found...?"

All four slimes were nearly identical, and I couldn't tell them apart. It was possible that one of the three that jumped out after could have been the one I was trying to find.

"I've been a slime for a long while, but I can say I don't know."

"Oh no..."

And now we had another problem.

How were we supposed to pick out Free Tuition?!

We decided to return to the gym for the time being.

But I was worrying to myself the whole way back.

This is bad... If Fighsly doesn't know which one was Free Tuition, then I feel even worse about all this...

Fighsly might say she didn't mind so much because she found it by the side of the road and it wasn't her pet, but that wasn't the problem here. The slime she'd named was one of them, and we couldn't pick out the right one.

"Um... Does Free Tuition have any distinct features? Like a birthmark or something...?"

"Slimes do not have birthmarks."

"Fingerprints? ...Probably not."

I tried using methods for telling human twins apart, but that wasn't going to work.

"I wonder which one it could be. But we have a one-in-four chance of getting it right. Each slime has a twenty-five percent chance of being Free Tuition."

"I don't think that's a good way to do it!"

That was still a 75 percent chance of whiffing it!

Fighsly was talking as if it was no big deal, but she was staring hard at each slime, trying to tell them apart. Even when we came back to the gym, she lined up the four slimes in her office.

“You think you can tell which is which?”

“No, they are frighteningly similar. And even if I call ‘Free Tuition,’ the same spot on their body responds.”

“Sheesh... This is a thousand times more difficult than trying to see if a baby chick is male or female...”

Maybe I should go to Wizly, the mage slime, and have her teach me a spell that can tell slimes apart?

“Mm, I think I’ve got it... Yes, that’s it, that’s it!” Fighsly raised her voice. “I’ve got it, Azusa!”

“Really? What a relief! So which one is Free Tuition?”

That was one less thing to worry about now.

“In a way, they are *all* Free Tuition.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Even if they had similar characteristics, only one of the four could be it.

“Azusa, Free Tuition divided into four! They look the same and respond to me the same way—this has to be the answer!”

“It divided?!”

What Fighsly was saying was that they were all the same person (?).

Now that she mentioned it, all the slimes were snuggled up close to her.

“I think what happened is that when it leaped into the river, its body divided into four. That’s why they all remember me.”

“They can proliferate that quickly?! I had no idea...”

“I wonder if it’s in part because of the waterway. A slime is made up mostly of water, so I think that’s a good place for them to reproduce.”

“Oh yeah, Falfa and Shalsha are also considered water-element spirits. But I hadn’t heard that way of them making more of themselves before...”

“The demons don’t seem to know very well how slimes proliferate, either. But isn’t it too much of a coincidence for four entirely separate slimes to act like this?”

The four slimes were clinging close to Fighsly, almost as if they were snuggling her.

“I...get that.”

I doubted slimes were intelligent enough to tell each other, *That demon over there is very nice to us.*

“I understand now. Free Tuition was afraid of dying when you approached it, leaped into the water, then used that water to split into four. I suppose its animal instinct to reproduce kicked in.”

“So I’m a murderer, huh? But I guess that’s how this works.”

That was a very strange experience—chasing an escaped pet to find it had made three more of itself.

“From left to right, I’ll name them Free Tuition 1, 2, 3, and 4, and keep them here in the gym.”

Fighsly was taking this awfully well.

I guess it was safe to call this all settled.

“By the way, Fighsly, do you know which one’s the original Free Tuition 1?”

Fighsly smiled at me. “No idea!”

“Thought so!”

Oh well. They looked so alike; really, it was impossible to tell if they were different at all.

The slimes busily clung to her, sliding this way and that across her.

“And now I am totally unable to tell 1 and 2 apart.”

It wasn’t easy to find unique differences in slimes.

I now understood how much of a miracle it was that the likes of Fighsly and Wizly had appeared in this world.

It would be bad if the Free Tuitions got scared of me and tried to run again, so I decided it was time to go. If four became sixteen, it would definitely be beyond Fighsly's control.

"Laika, Flatorte, I was thinking about going somewhere else—"

Both of them were in the middle of hard practice. At some point, they'd changed into training gear; they were practically just students now.

"Please train with me, Flatorte!"

"Laika, I'm hoping to do some blocking exercises next, so may I have some punches?"

The demon students had completely accepted them into the group, too.

Humans probably wouldn't be able to practice properly with them (they'd just die), so demons in the middle of training were probably a great match. The dragons would probably win in a real battle, but at least they had some powerful people to train with.

"My apologies, Lady Azusa, but I have another thirty sets!"

"If you're doing thirty sets, then I, the great Flatorte, will do thirty-one!"

"I'm not sure exactly how many reps are in a set, but I get you're not going to be done for a while. It's fine; I'll go on my own."

Well, it wasn't a horrible thing to walk around the city as I pleased, and I could go back to Beelzebub's manor if I wanted.

I was playing everything by ear today. I might even run into Halkara and Rosalie, who were off on their own in the city, during my stroll. It was nice to walk around without a destination every once in a while.

Fighsly and her gaggle of Free Tuitions came out from the office. One was riding on her head. It reminded me of the stuff I'd sometimes seen from Paris Fashion Week—outfits that were just totally impossible to walk around in normally.

“If you have nowhere to go, Azusa, why not drop by the leviathans’ house?” she suggested. “Oh, and it’s not a workday today, so they won’t be at work.”

Which meant that if I went to their house, there was a good chance at least one of them would be there.

“I’ll take you up on that, then. If they’re not home, then I’ll just deal with that when I come to it.”

“Okay. I know where they live, so I’ll draw you a map.”

A few minutes later, she returned holding a piece of paper with this on it:

Proceed north on this road (Cyclops Road) until you come to a four-way intersection with a general store on the left—turn right. Walk for a few minutes until you come to a stream, where you will turn left and walk along the river. Cross the third bridge and proceed straight down that road. At some point, you will come across a small park, where you will turn right just after it. At the second corner, turn left, and after about three minutes, you will see a small hill. Walk along the hill and proceed another three minutes after going down the hill. There you will find a spacious yard—it stands out. That is Fatla and Vania’s house.

“Why did you write it out?!”

I’d be hard-pressed to call this a map. There was no picture. Just reading it was starting to make me panic.

“Sorry, but there are so many little roads here that I thought it would be easier to spell it out rather than draw a map. But I wrote it in the human language; you can read it, right?”

Figsly could apparently write in the human language, too, probably because she spent a lot of time in the human lands entering tournaments. She really was an incredible slime when you accounted for all that.

“Yeah, this is all right, but... I guess I’ll follow your instructions...”

It wasn’t like I had an invitation I could be late for; if I couldn’t get there, I’d just cross that bridge when I came to it (metaphorically).

I carefully walked according to the directions, but when I started to get

confused, I just asked a passing demon about the neighborhood with the park and the small hill.

I somehow managed to find the hill and the path that led down, so I knew I was on track. Finally, I arrived at a house with an unusually large lawn, big enough to play soccer in.

“This must be it.”

They must have secured a plot of land big enough for leviathans to turn into their true form.

But there was no interphone, so I wasn’t sure how to get their attention. The entrance was some ways away from the other side of the gate—but then I spotted a bell at the top of the gatepost. I guess that’s what I was supposed to ring.

Kala-kalang, kala-kalang.

I wish they’d install something a little easier to use. Now that I thought about it, what did big estates on Earth do long ago? They had guards, right? Or did they just not let anyone without an appointment in?

“Hello, who is it?”

Someone from across the street came out! It was a lady centaur.

“Oh, I’m just here to see someone in this house!”

“Ah, the leviathan sisters.”

This time, a demon man with dog ears emerged from the house next to the lady’s. “Ah, she’s visiting the house next door~ So hard to tell whose bell is whose~”

“This isn’t a very convenient system! Would you consider changing your bells?”

“Well, it would just be a waste if we got a good-quality one and it was stolen. And the cheap ones with a good ring are all done by the same maker.”

“Exactly. It’d be embarrassing to set up a bell that’s *too* cheap, you see~”

Sounded like some demon societal problem.

And the leviathan sisters in question...still weren't showing up.

In the meantime, the neighbors were all appearing in droves. These things carried more of a ring than I thought.

"Ahhh, it's the leviathans' house."

"It's hard to hear outside sounds in there."

"Hello there, would you like some vegetables from our garden?"

I felt like a whole TV crew that had come to a quiet neighborhood.

"Um... Is this what happens whenever someone rings a bell...?" I was getting super uncomfortable.

"Yes. Almost everyone comes out, but that means all those rotten salespeople get spooked and never come back."

"When I see those salespeople on the verge of tears, all my stress melts away. Once they know they've made a mistake, we all come out for a chat and ask all kinds of questions."

"It's the perfect way to keep crime low, you see."

I didn't know it needed a purpose.

But I could clearly see how it could traumatize scammers and keep them out... Getting surrounded like this was psychologically distressing.

Meanwhile, the man with the dog ears was yelling straight at the leviathan manor. "Leviathan sisters~! You've got a guest! Are you home?!"

So yelling was what I should've done, huh?!

That primitive method proved to be a success, and Vania emerged from the house. "Oh, Miss Azusa! Why are you here?"

"No reason, really. I was just in the city and decided to drop by because I had nothing else to do."

"I see. Well, I don't want to keep you outside forever, so come on in. Wow, you sure brought a lot with you."

"Oh, your neighbors just gave me all this."

They'd handed me sacks full of fruits and vegetables I didn't recognize.

I didn't know what any of them tasted like, but in the worst-case scenario, I'd just leave them with Beelzebub.

"Your neighborhood gatherings get kinda...intense..." I waved to the neighbors and followed Vania.

"You're right~ But not all demons are like that. This is unique to this neighborhood. Everyone here is very relaxed. They like to all come out when someone rings a bell. Welcome to our home!"

We'd just come to the front gate, but it was a very fancy manor.

A mansion like this would easily cost a million dollars in my past life...

"Leviathans must be rich, huh?"

"I think it was like that long ago, but we're humble bureaucrats now. The real rich live in expansive estates out in the country. Anyone who lives here in the city isn't that rich."

I had a feeling I'd heard the same thing in my previous life.

"Please come in, Lady Azusa."

The inside was incredible, too—refined, not some eccentric's lair with tons of weird little knickknacks everywhere. It felt like going to a friend's house that was fancy to the point of being slightly uncomfortable.

The leviathans were like Tokyo-resident celebs.

"I'll go whip up some sweets for you, so please have a seat in the reception room."

They had a room specifically for receiving guests.

"I guess Fatla's out? Shopping?" I said.

"No, she's around. I think she's in the greenhouse."

Now that she mentioned it, I spotted another building in the distance from the window. They *had* to be rich with a building like that. The greenhouse alone had to be bigger than my house in my past life.

“Would you mind if I went there?”

Exploring other people’s homes was exciting. I’d be bored out of my mind just sitting here waiting.

“Oh, sure, go on ahead. Explore as much as you like.”

Vania was quick to give her approval, so I decided I’d explore freely.

I came out to the garden and glanced back at the house again—*Yep, it’s huge.*

It didn’t seem like their parents lived with them, which meant that the two of them lived alone in a house of this size. It was fair to say they were well off, although cleaning seemed like it’d be a handful.

As those thoughts went through my head, I reached the greenhouse.

These were meant for cultivating plants, right? I guess since Vania’s cooking was more than just a little hobby, they had a greenhouse so she could grow her own ingredients, but why would Fatla be inside?

Well, I’d just open the door and find out.

Due to the nature of the building, there were two sets of doors leading to the inside.

When I opened the second door, I was greeted by thick air and a sight that sent a chill down my spine despite the warmth.

The walls, ceiling, and of course the floor were all covered in green.

But it wasn’t a uniform green; some parts were dark, almost black, and some parts were more yellow. Some were a pale green. Either way, all of it was green.

“This...is moss...”

The only spots I didn’t see any moss were the stepping-stones on the floor.

I guess I was supposed to follow these inside?

From the outside, the greenhouse was in the shape of an L, so after proceeding straight forward, the building bent to the left.

I could tell this didn’t have anything to do with Vania’s hobbies, at least. This wasn’t food.

“Oh yeah, I think someone said that Fatla likes moss at some point... But I didn’t know it was *this* much...”

This was absurd. This wasn’t just a little hobby. It was basically the house of a moss artisan.

I wondered if all demons’ hobbies reached unbelievable mastery like this, considering their long lives.

“I feel like I’m in the underworld. I want to find Fatla quickly...”

I walked forward, being careful to step only on the places with no moss. I couldn’t spot her, so she was probably around the one corner in the building.

That was when a figure in the distance peered at me.

“Oh, Fatla—”

A chill ran down my spine.

Standing there was a large humanoid figure covered in dark-green moss. Despite the shape, nothing indicated that it was human at all. I had no way of telling if it had a face, or even if it had any bones at all. The precise outline of its figure was all fuzzy.

The way it shambled was unsettling, like the undead. No one walked around town like this.

Logically, it should be Fatla, but this figure seemed much too big for that. Whatever it was that stood before me was practically twice her size.

“Aah, aah... Aah... Haaaah...”

The monster sounded like it was trying to say something, but it didn’t mean anything. This wasn’t a creature that could communicate!

It turned to face me fully.

Its face was, of course, all moss; I couldn’t see any eyes or a mouth. I didn’t even know if that was its actual face.

“Gah! It’s a monster! A real monster!” I screamed.

I shouldn’t have seen this thing! It was *something* made of pure evil!

Was it a moss-covered golem? Or something actually undead? I only knew undead that weren't scary like Pondeli, but that did seem to be what this was.

Luckily, it didn't make any move to attack me.

I gotta get out of here! I don't wanna fight something I don't understand! Doesn't matter how strong I get—what's scary is scary!

"Stay away, stay away! Stay there! You can chase after me, but do it slowly, like an undead! No breaking into a run or anything, okay?!"

The moment I was about to whirl around—

The monster's handlike appendage reached up and brushed at its own face—and Fatla appeared from behind it.

"Miss Azusa? Why are you here?"

"You're the real Fatla, right? You're not possessed by moss or anything, right?"

"I apologize for frightening you. I cannot speak very well with moss on my face."

Well, at least she wasn't a monster I shouldn't have met.

"Hey, have you always been that big, Fatla?"

"I look bigger when I adhere the moss to me."

Now that she mentioned it, her silhouette seemed way too big for her face. Like her outside was all moss.

"By the way... Why are you all...fuzzy and green?"

"I was moss bathing."

The answer didn't really explain anything.

"What's that?"

"I believe it would be easier for you to understand if you saw it for yourself. Come this way."

Fatla vanished into the back of the greenhouse. All the moss was causing her to move slowly, like she wasn't really alive.

I had a feeling I was going to see something else shocking, so I really wished she would give me a quick verbal rundown instead of showing me, but I didn't have much choice but to follow after her.

When I rounded the corner, I found even more of the fuzzy green stuff—it was practically up to my knees.

“I will demonstrate for you now,” Fatla said, and then dove into the moss.

Thwump went her body, as if she had fallen into incredibly viscous liquid. Then her weight slowly dragged her down beneath the surface.

After about ten seconds, she vanished completely from view.

“I don't have to save you, right...?” I asked, but there was no answer.

After about ten seconds, Fatla slowly sat up, her face now completely covered again.

“Uhhh... Uhhh...”

“Gah, this is terrifying! You're scaring me! At least take off the moss when you talk!”

Fatla removed only the moss on her mouth, which was scary enough as it was.

“You submerge your whole body into the moss and become one with it. That is moss bathing.”

“Gotcha. Pretty sure I can say it's not my cup of tea...”

“Before, I simply cultivated the moss, but I grew to love it more as I did so. Eventually, I wanted to become one with it, which is when I arrived at this stage.”

Her nonchalance as she talked about all this only made me even more frightened.

“All my exhaustion from working vanishes when I am here. I often moss bathe on our days off.”

“You sure have an interesting hobby...”

“Since you're here, why not give it a try yourself, Miss Azusa?” She pointed to

the moss.

“I sincerely apologize, but I must decline.”

“That is what Vania said before she did it.”

“Vania did this, too?!”

I guess it was hard to say no when your older sister told you to do it. And Vania apparently had a good time, so maybe it wasn't all that bad.

“According to her, you will briefly feel as if you are floating, then as if you are sinking deep into the inescapable void of a bottomless ocean abyss.”

“That's a terrifying experience!”

“She did say she would never do it again. I find the vanishing feeling to be quite nice.”

Today, I learned that Fatla is a surprisingly scary person.

The real serious types were able to stay that way by balancing it out with something super weird.

“Miss Azusa, pretend as though I've deceived—”

“I will not do it! No matter what happens!”



When I returned to the reception room, Vania laughed at me.

“You must have seen the moss woman. It's so creepy, isn't it~? She visits me in my nightmares sometimes.”

“You should've told me that beforehand! I felt like I lost a few years off my immortal life span!”

“Well, she only ever does that in the greenhouse, so just let her do her thing. She seems to find it relaxing over there.”

Did demons really need a way to relax like that? It was probably best for myself and my family if we kept our lives low-stress to begin with.

About ten minutes later, Vania came back with the sweets she'd made.

At about the same time, Fatla returned free of moss. I didn't see any of it on

her—she must have taken a shower or something. She had a good handle on getting clean after all that, apparently.

“Sorry for intruding so suddenly. I went to Fighsly’s gym, then wondered where I could go next, and that’s how I ended up here.”

“Ah, I see Lady Beelzebub must be with your daughters today.”



“That’s right, they’re *my* daughters.” I had to be really careful that Beelzebub didn’t snatch parental authority away from me while I wasn’t looking.

The three of us had a little tea party. It was a nice way to spend a day off.

“Vania, these are really good. They look sweet, but they’re a little spicy, too.”

The baked snacks tasted kind of like *okaki* snacks from back in Japan.

“I’m always making something on my days off~ It’s how I reduce stress~”

“How on earth do you get stressed with the way you work?” Fatla retorted flatly. She did not go easy on her little sister when it came to work.

“This has been quite a full day; I learned more about both you and Fighsly.”

The only times I’d ever seen the leviathan sisters so far had been while they were working.

“I am certain you can discover a new side of yourself if you decide to take a dip in moss.”

“Stop trying to persuade me.” I was fine living life ignorant of that!

“Fighsly has seemed much happier ever since she opened her gym.” Fatla spoke well of Fighsly. “She now takes money more into consideration, always thinking as a business owner how she may keep the gym running.”

“She’s exactly the same as she has been!”

But considering how she had the affection of those wild slimes, I was certain her students looked up to her, too.

Everyone’s really grown in these past few years.



I dropped by the gym to pick up Laika and Flatorte, and we went back to Beelzebub’s manor.

“Oh, Mommy! Welcome back!”

“Do we look okay, Mom...?”

Surprisingly, Falfa and Shalsha were wearing dresses I’d never seen before.

Yes, they were lovely. That was fact. But—

“Magnificent, no? I had these prepared for them ahead of time to suit their sizes.”

“Why do you know their sizes, Beelzebub?” *Don’t measure them without my permission.*

“Why would I *not* know their sizes? How many times do you think I’ve been to the house in the highlands?”

It was hard to argue with that logic.

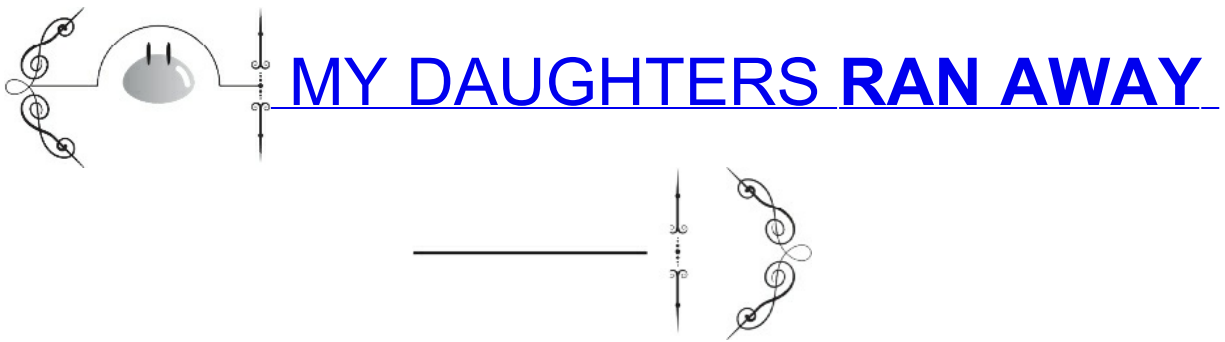
“Indeed, I was hoping to dress up Sandra as well, but she told me she is much calmer when in the dirt. She refuses to put it on...” She saw Sandra completely as her daughter, too.

Later, Wynona would say to me quietly, “This woman is much too blinded by her affection for my sisters...”

“I guess after a week of work, she has to relieve her stress on her days off somehow.”

Beelzebub had taken on the role of doting parent in such a short period of time. Was this growth? Probably not.

Personally, this turned out to be a very colorful weekend for me; I got to see a new side to many of the demons on their day off.



On a sunny morning, I took all our laundry and brought it outside.

“It’s chilly, but the sun should dry it all.”

Our family was big, which meant we had a lot of laundry. But still, it wasn’t nearly as stressful as doing overtime in front of a computer screen.

It was then that I heard a voice that left me no choice but to stop what I was doing.

Sandra was crying.

“Waaaaah! Aaaaaahhh!”

I couldn’t ignore her, not when she sounded so much like a little child.

“What’s wrong, Sandra? Did you have a fight?”

Sandra was crouched down in the vegetable garden. All my kids got along well, so I rarely ever saw any of them cry like this.

“*Sniff...* I don’t want to cry... I’ll dry up and wither...”

That was a plant’s perspective, though...

“Look at my head, Azusa. When I woke up this morning, a bug had eaten some of my leaves!”

When she pointed it out, I saw that part of her leaves—which was basically just her hair—was shorter. I guess bugs actually did see them as leaves...

Still, I understood why she would cry. When I was in high school, getting my hair cut too short was an upsetting surprise. Well, Momma Yufufu cut my hair

once, too, but I was over three hundred years old at that point.

“Hair is a woman’s pride, after all. It’s not a nice feeling to have it cut short.”

“I won’t be able to photosynthesize as much.”

“Oh, that’s why.”

Fashion was the least of her worries, apparently.

“I’ll get hungry if I can’t photosynthesize. You’re not on a diet, Azusa, but you’d still hate it if someone took away one of your dishes at dinner, right?”

“I get that.”

It sucks not getting enough to eat—and since a daughter of mine was crying, I couldn’t just leave her to figure it out on her own.

I crouched down and gently pulled Sandra into a hug. I had to act like her mother at least once in a while, after all.

“You can stay in the house for as long as you like today until you calm down, okay? It should be safer in there.”

“I don’t like it in there because I can’t photosynthesize.”

We’re struggling to get on the same page here...

“Then you can stay with me, okay? I’ll swat any bugs that come your way. I’ll be sure to stay outside as long as I can.”

There was a lot of work I could do outdoors, like hunting for herbs.

“Okay. I’ll do that. And...at night...” Sandra hesitated for a second before she whispered, “I’ll sleep in your room. There might be more bugs here in the vegetable garden.”

Yes! She was counting on me as her mom!

“Of course! Mommy will protect you!”

I hugged Sandra even tighter.

“Um, it’s kind of weird for you to act like my mother since you’re not a plant... It’s not like you raised me from seedlinghood.”

“You sure are harsh with animals.”

We might not be in step for quite a while yet, but I decided to spend the day glued to Sandra.

For lunch, I sat eating a sandwich next to Sandra.

“Mm, delicious! Eating outside is much better—it almost feels like I went out for a little hike!”

“I wish the sun was a bit stronger, but this is nice.”

Sandra was standing up, which made it a bit unnatural, but this was the right way to communicate with a plant.

Afterward, Sandra and I ventured into the nearby forest to look for herbs.

“Oh, that grass is no good. It steals our nutrients. I’ll pull it out by the root.”

“It seems kind of unfair for one plant to be able to uproot others...”

“Plants must fight one another for survival, too. I almost feel as though I need to evolve with some kind of deadly poison in my leaves at this point.”

Was that something she could do on her own? And if she wasn’t wholly successful, I had a feeling she would only garner more attention as a plant that could be used for medicine instead.

At dinner, Sandra decided to lie down in the dining room. Not on the sofa, though. On the floor.

“...Hey, Sandra, it’s a bit strange to lie on the floor in the corner of the room. At least sit in a chair,” Flatorte reasonably cautioned.

It sounded like it was a little weird, even to the messy and haphazard dragon.

“No need. I will relax here, like a plant should.”

“Hey, Sandra? Do you want some water?”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but no. I can’t have too much water.”

It wasn’t easy living with a plant. I couldn’t just place myself in her shoes to figure out what she was thinking.

And then it was bedtime.

“Oh yes! You’re so cute! It looks so good on you!”

“Really? It won’t be easy to get in the ground like this, so I have a hard time liking it...”

I’d put Sandra in some adorable pajamas, complete with lacy embroidery. I’d bought them a while ago, but I never got the chance to put her in them. They’d get dirty in the ground, after all...

“Well, it’s still safe in here since you’re with me. I sense no bugs. I can sleep easy.” Sandra didn’t seem as annoyed as I thought she would be.

Yes, very good, very good. “Think of this as your own room until your leaves grow back, okay? I can sing you a lullaby, too.”

“No, too loud for me.”

There was a lot of work involved when it came to treating her like a child.

Sandra stole a glance at my bed. “But...I guess I can sleep in your bed.”

Yes! Yes! And I’d let her do anything she wanted!

“Of course, of course! You are a precious daughter of mine, of course!”

Things were going in a great direction. Maybe my love had finally gotten through to her. All my effort was starting to pay off.

But then—

Knock, knock.

—There came a knock at the door. I could tell by the sound who it was.

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“Falfa? What is it?”

The door clicked open. I was right—there stood Falfa and Shalsha.

But something was wrong. Falfa was pouting, which was unusual. Shalsha just looked plain sleepy. It was nighttime, after all.

“You’ve been too nice to Sandra today, Mommy. It’s not fair.”

“*Yaaawn...* A government lacking in equity is not a good thing. Shalsha will give you candid advice.”

Ah. They must not have been happy with how much extra attention I’d been giving Sandra today. I think I made them jealous.

But Sandra had suffered real harm with her hair getting eaten, so I wanted to give her some special care.

“Falfa, Shalsha, some bugs got to Sandra and she was crying this morning. So just stick through it for a little longer, okay? It’s only temporary. Yeah?”

Falfa and Shalsha exchanged glances.

“Okay, Mommy. It’s too late to talk and make any decisions now, so tomorrow.”

“*Yawn...* We will stand down for the day. We will negotiate in the morning. Shalsha is sleepy, so I am going back.”

The two returned to their room.

I’d make sure they understood somehow. They were the big sisters here. *Wait, Sandra is older than them age-wise, so maybe they’re not...? She might even be older than me.*

I didn’t really have an answer for that yet.

That night, Sandra snuggled up in bed with me. And she fell asleep right away. I could hear her soft snoring almost a few seconds after she got into bed.

“Maybe you aren’t sleeping, exactly, but get some rest...”

Humans needed a bit of time before they fell asleep, but it seemed like plants could pull it off instantly. Exactly how many of Sandra’s behaviors were due to

her being a plant was still a mystery, though.



The following day, my routine was almost exactly the same as it had been the day before.

When the sun was at its brightest, I went outside with Sandra and stayed there as long as possible. She needed the sunlight, so this was normal for her, though. It was another beautiful day, so that wasn't a big problem.

But what made today different was that Falfa and Shalsha kept popping in on me to watch.

"What's up, you two? Want to play with Sandra?"

"We're just taking a walk during a break from our reading, so no thank you."

"We wanted to spend some time with our books."

That's what they told me, but I could tell that they weren't exactly happy with the way Sandra and I were glued together like this.

I did understand how they felt, but this wasn't favoritism, and I wasn't restricting them. They were allowed to have snacks and go out if they wanted. I was their mother, so I was well aware of these things. I just hoped they would put up with the frustration in the meantime.

I was basically a mom taking care of her kid while they're sick. Sandra was injured (?).

The two were smart, and they seemed to understand that, which was why they didn't expressly ask for her to come play with them.

I'd be sure to buy them something extra yummy in the near future.

—But those tasty treats came from a different route.

"Here, these are called 'the lid on the purgatory cauldron,' a well-known delicacy from a rural part of the demon lands. They're so crispy! You'll want to eat a hundred at once!"

Beelzebub came to the house in the highlands with a gift. She was seriously here so often that I was wondering if she actually had a house nearby.

“Another snack with a scary name, huh?”

It was a baked treat in the shape of a circle; my guess was that it was sweet.

“’Twas named eons ago. You’re best off ignoring it. Come now, Falfa, Shalsha, have a taste~!”

Falfa and Shalsha were both excited at the prospect of a snack.

“Yaaay! Thank you always, Miss Beelzebub!”

“We will repay you for your kindness one day.”

“Seeing you girls so delighted is enough for me. I may be punished if I ask for any more~”

“Yeah, I’m glad you got to see *my* girls’ delighted faces. I’m so glad that you’re so kind to *my* girls.”

“You are emphasizing that they are *yours* quite a bit, no...?”

“I’m just telling the truth, okay?”

Psychological warfare had begun over the silliest thing—but I had to be careful that she didn’t suddenly start assuming my daughters were hers.

Still, it was truly perfect timing that Beelzebub came today.

Getting treats from her must surely have helped them feel less slighted. Sandra didn’t eat our kinds of snacks at all, especially, so it felt like they were getting even more special treatment than Sandra was.

“I’ll get you some fertilizer in water, Sandra. I hope that restores your eaten leaves more quickly.”

“Thank you. I hope they’re even more beautiful than last time.”

After three or four days with Sandra, I’ll do something for Falfa and Shalsha.

I was going to be a well-balanced mother.

That night, Falfa and Shalsha didn’t complain to me at all about my sleeping with Sandra, probably an effect of the treats Beelzebub brought. I guess I could call this problem solved.

“You seem like a weight’s been lifted off you, Azusa.”

“I have to think about the well-being of every family member, you see.”

“Mm-hmm. Animals are a handful.”

Sometimes her standards seemed really arbitrary...

Again, Sandra hopped into bed and fell asleep within seconds.

“You don’t have to be a handful, sure, but it’s okay to be a *little* bit of a handful...”

The next morning, Beelzebub told us she had a survey on resources for marine products in the human kingdom for the next few days, hopped on her wyvern, and left.

“Byeeee! Come agaaain! I’m sure you will anyway.”

I wasn’t sure if it was okay for demons to just go around surveying human territory, but it didn’t seem like they were planning a takeover or anything that would harm me.

However, it wasn’t Beelzebub who had woken me up this morning. It was Sandra, who had gotten up with the rising sun.

She was still with me, too.

Plants sure got an early start; maybe the sun made sure they didn’t sleep. I didn’t know any other mandragoras, so I wasn’t exactly sure, though.

“Right—I’m going to go make some breakfast. Are you going to photosynthesize here?”

“Hmm, the sun is still weak, so I’ll go back into the house.”

She seemed much healthier and more energetic compared to when she was sobbing, so it didn’t look like there was going to be much of a problem anymore.

I did have a room open just for Sandra, so she was more than welcome to live inside the house in the highlands at night. But she was the type to get offended if I was too pushy with my suggestions, so I was just going to wait for her to bring it up herself.

Laika was awake by the time food was ready. Rosalie was floating around the

dining table, too.

“Great, breakfast’s ready. I’ll go call everyone else.”

As I went down the hall, I passed Halkara and Flatorte, so the only ones left were Falfa and Shalsha.

I knocked on their door.

But there was no answer.

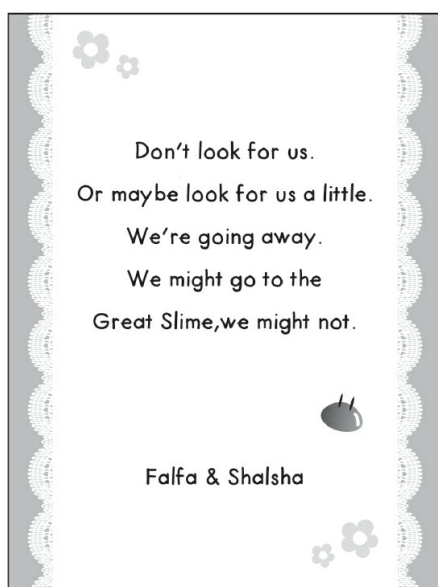
I guess they’re still sleeping.

“Breakfast is ready, you two~” I slowly opened the door.

They were gone.

“Huh? Where did they go...?”

I then spotted a paper lying on their bed.



“Aaaaaaaah! They ran away!!”

I screamed.

How had it come to this...?

I hadn’t been so cold to them that they would want to run away, had I...?

Wait.

Maybe that was why.

Since I’d put up a defensive line to make sure none of them would come childishly whining to me for more attention, they might’ve gotten even more

frustrated. Maybe trying to put up with it had only made them more stressed...?

I hated putting it this way, but maybe they'd been suffocated. I'd deprived them of the necessities to live but not enough to die.

Whatever—I have to do something!

"What is it, Lady Azusa?"

"I, Flatorte, will strike down any enemy, Mistress!"

The dragons had come running.

When I returned to the dining room, I showed the rest of the family the letter.

"‘Don't look for us. Or maybe look for us a little.’ What do they want? I don't get what they're trying to say." Flatorte was frustrated.

I was their parent, but I couldn't say her complaints were completely ridiculous.

"You truly lack the delicacy for this, Flatorte. This letter reflects their feelings. What would be the point of running away if all they wrote was, *Please look for us*? They cannot simply write everything they think." Laika skillfully explained the subtleties of Falfa and Shalsha's letter.

"But it still says they want us to look for them." Flatorte tilted her head.

"That is why this is complicated. You are a bad child, Flatorte—you must have run away from home several times before, no?"

"It's normal for blue dragons to suddenly leave without saying anything, then come back a month later. When I was young, sometimes my dad wouldn't come back for a whole year."

Her family environment was so unique, she couldn't connect at all!

"Ohhh... Why did it come to this...? Maybe I was too prideful... Maybe I got lazy because they were such good kids..."

"It's not your fault, Azusa. It's mine," Sandra said, tugging on my clothes.

Doting on Sandra might have been what started all this, and Sandra was feeling responsible. But this wasn't something she should worry about.

“Heh... Maybe animals and plants shouldn’t be friends after all,” she mused.

“Oh, stop it with the plants versus animals thing, already! That definitely has nothing to do with it!”

No one was on the same page here, so for better or worse, I was anxious about all this.

“They’re children. I think they were sad they didn’t get much attention.”

It sounded strange for Sandra, who seemed the most childlike of all of them, to say that, but things would keep going if I were to engage, so I ignored her.

“That may be it. And that’s why they decided to run away.”

This wasn’t a stereotypical runaway case, though.

“Oh, everyone, let’s think about this positively!” Halkara cried. “Let’s consider what we can do right now!”

“That’s right! Cheer up, Big Sis!” Rosalie added. They were both trying to lighten the uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Sorry for making you both worry.”

“Big Sis, all they really did was just leave the house, so it’ll work out! It’s not like they killed themselves, so we can still get them back! Me, I’m already dead!”

“All your examples are way too extreme!”

Oh yeah, Rosalie’s parents actually betrayed her, which led her to suicide and turned her into a spirit...

Everyone was way too unique; it was hard to concentrate on the incident.

“If we think calmly about this, then they likely went to the Great Slime, right? That is the closest they have to a hometown, and Wynona lives nearby. I believe that would be the perfect spot for them to run to.”

It was kind of rude to say this was a surprise, but Halkara was the most reliable one here. She was a terrible drinker, but her experience with the factory really came in handy sometimes.

“You’re right. The problem is that the Great Slime is *kiiiinda* far away...”

It was hard to tell exactly where they might be right now.

“If they’re going by foot, then I hope they don’t get attacked by monsters...,” I said. “They’re weak enough that an encounter with a boar could be dangerous...”

“I can search for them from the sky, Lady Azusa!” Laika declared, pounding her fist against her chest. “I will find them immediately! They cannot be too far as of now!”

“Thank you, Laika. Can you do that? I’ll look from the ground.”

“I, Flatorte, will help!”

“I’ll show you what a ghost’s really good for!”

I was starting to get my smile back. We were all a part of the same family. This wasn’t my problem alone.

Of course they would help search for the twins, and I knew if we put all of our heads together, we’d find them.

And I guess I wasn’t so much worried about them running away, but shocked that they’d take such measures.

The act itself was basically a cry for us to find them, so I figured this would get resolved quickly.

“Thank you, all of you!” I said to them. We were part of the same family, after all. “And I’m sorry, Sandra, but you should stay home, okay?”

It wasn’t safe to send her alone into the woods to search.

“Sure, I’ll be here, photosynthesizing quietly.” Sandra seemed a bit frustrated, knowing that she wasn’t going to be much help. But everyone had things they could and couldn’t do; that’s just how it was.

“And you go to work, Halkara. Flatorte, take her to Nascúte. You can start searching after that.”

“You’re right... Things would only get worse if I helped...”

Oh, she’s aware...

We settled on what we were going to do for the time being.

Either way, we were going to find Falfa and Shalsha. All I had to do was decide what I was going to say to them when I saw them again.

I'd apologize to them for forcing them to go through something they hated that much, and I would tell them to apologize to the whole family who went through the trouble of searching for them. That was probably a decent compromise...

A mutual apology wouldn't leave any seeds for future trouble.



All that said...

"Falfa, Shalsha, where are yooouuu? Where are yooouuu?! Answer me!" I ran around the entirety of the highlands, but I could see neither hide nor hair of them.

It was then that Rosalie floated my way.

"Big Sis, maybe they hid when they figured out you were trying to find them? You wouldn't be much of a runaway if you were found so fast."

"You're right... It'd be hard to call it running away if I found them in a half hour..."

And this meant that me showing them how hard I was looking was only going to make them harder to find. That said, I could see dragon Laika flapping around up there in the sky, so it wasn't going to be easy to search quietly.

Wait, but maybe it was safer if Laika did the searching instead of me?

I wasn't sure what sort of state of mind I should be in. I'd never run away from home—but maybe I should have, at least once...

After Flatorte had dropped Halkara off at the factory, she joined in on the search. Unfortunately, we didn't spot anything that looked like the twins on the route to the Great Slime, and the morning came to a fruitless end.

We used our lunchtime as a strategy meeting.

"They probably...didn't go to the Great Slime." That was the conclusion I came to. "I searched the ground, Laika and Flatorte looked from the air, and Rosalie searched in places people can't normally see. It isn't like Falfa and Shalsha are

world-class hide-and-seek players, so it's hard to imagine we'll go very long without finding them."

"They didn't turn into slimes and run, did they?" Sandra suggested. I hadn't even thought of that.

"If...that happened, then it'd be almost impossible to find them, but...it isn't as though they can turn into slimes of their own free will, so I think we'll be okay."

"But this will not be easy." The hardworking Laika had, at some point, started drawing up a map for our search. "Flatta is in a different direction from the Great Slime, but I wondered if they had gone to pick up supplies first, so I went to confirm. However, the villagers told me that neither had been there."

"Good thinking! You really are a good kid, Laika... You're honestly perfect."

"Please do not compliment me so lavishly... Anyone would do the same. But... it is an honor to hear your praise..." Though she humbled herself, Laika was still happy. She was complicated.

The Great Slime was far away, and it sounded realistic for them to spend time in Flatta instead, but that possibility quickly broke down.

Also, the reason I decided to leave Flatta for last was because I knew it would be hard for them to hide there. The villagers all knew who Falfa and Shalsha were, so they'd be found out super quick.

"Then where could they be...? Is it possible they might still be in the hou—?"

"I slipped through all the rooms to check. They're not in the attic or under the floorboards, either."

"If you've checked, Rosalie, then they aren't." It was nearly impossible to hide and run from Rosalie. "I looked in the walls and in the chairs, too, but they weren't there."

"We'd be in a horror story if they were in the chairs!"

They could pull out the insides of the couch and hide there, but that wasn't technically running away from home.

"What should we do? I don't know where to go..."

“Do not be discouraged, Lady Azusa. They are good children. It is not entirely unusual for them to have done something that would make them harder to find. We will search through everything one step at a time,” Laika consoled me.

She was right. A mom couldn’t get discouraged like this.

“Yeah, first, we’ll ask both the Great Slime and Wynona to contact us if they show up.”

If their plan was to return to their homeland, we’d get some info nearer their goal.

“And just in case, we’ll ask Beelzebub if they’re in—huh?”

A doubt crossed my mind then—something even deeper than doubt, in fact.

“Beelzebub left early this morning, didn’t she...? They weren’t with her, were they...?”

Beelzebub would gleefully betray me if the two said they were going to be her daughters. She’d do it without a single twinge of conscience.

I was almost certain she was the culprit here.

“But Beelzebub was getting around on a wyvern, right? Were Falfa and Shalsha on it with her...? I didn’t see...”

Oh, Sandra had seen Beelzebub off, too.

“Wait, but it still sounds way too easy, even if it was a coincidence. She told me where she was working, so I’ll go see her.”

I had a feeling it wouldn’t be very nice of me to summon her while she was on the job, and it wasn’t like summoning her alone was going to bring Falfa and Shalsha along, either.



We decided we would get going at noon and continue into the following day.

I hopped on Laika and went to visit the Great Slime and Wynona, where we told them both about Falfa and Shalsha running away.

As for Wynona, there was a chance that she was sheltering the two, much like Beelzebub, but it wasn’t possible that they’d made it to her place at this

moment in time. Which meant Wynona wasn't a suspect.

We had to give Laika a chance to rest, so that night, we stayed at the inn in a nearby town. We were not going to exert ourselves, nor was I going to let her.

The next day, we met up with Flatorte and exchanged info. Neither of the twins had showed up back at the house in the highlands the previous day. Oh well. I hopped back on Laika, and we kept going.

We were making our way toward our biggest suspect, Beelzebub.

Beelzebub should not have returned to Vanzeld by now, so she was probably still in human lands. She said her work was going to take a few days anyway. Even though it was a rural-ish area, I still knew where she was going.

"I bet she's feeding Falfa and Shalsha cake at a café during her breaks—I just know she is. Damn you, Beelzebub!"

"Uh, Lady Azusa? We still do not know if Miss Beelzebub truly is the culprit here..."

"I'm not saying she is. But she's way too suspicious! I can read her like a book!"

Beelzebub was in the mountains with some other demons, checking how some trees were bearing fruit.

"Huh? Falfa and Shalsha aren't here..."

"What are you doing here? I am certain I did not forget anything at your place." Beelzebub seemed annoyed with us, so I told her about my daughters running away. I didn't want to tell her, but I couldn't come all this way and then not say anything.

"Wh-what?! How awful! We must gather a thousand-strong search party!"

"The human kingdom will mistake it for a demon attack! Please don't!"

"But they have not been home for an entire day, so what are we to do if something has happened to them?! Azusa you may be, but you cannot guarantee their lives! I hope you have prepared for the consequences of your

actions!”

“You’re *still* talking like they’re yours!!”

That isn’t something you say to a mother searching for her missing children!

But Beelzebub’s reaction was real, which meant that they hadn’t come to her, then...

“I can’t believe this... I was convinced that they told you they wanted to run away and asked you to take them...”

“How horribly rude you are! I knew you were not fit to care for the girls! Falfa and Shalsha are my daughters, starting immediately! I’m leaving everything I own to both of them!”

“See, this is why I’m suspicious of you! You’re responsible for exactly half of my doubt!”

“Ah, I believe you both will be going in circles, as though asking if the egg or the cockatrice came first, so please calm down...,” Laika admonished us.

“You’re right... Now’s not the time to fight with Beelzebub.”

“I will lay the life of every demon on the line to find them.”

That’s way too heavy a price, so please no.

“Hmm, but this just brings us back to square one. Where did Falfa and Shalsha go? Maybe it’s not more than hide-and-seek, but they’re way too good at this.”

They couldn’t fly, they didn’t know any teleportation spells, and they weren’t able to go fast like on horseback.

They may be hundreds of times harder than regular children of their apparent age, but we should understand the scope of their movement.

I held up the map Laika made, and the questions were flooding my brain.

“’Tis times like these we must think logically. Let us say they can walk four *gilro* in one hour. Which means the farthest they were able to go without getting caught in your search that morning was about here.” Beelzebub drew a line on the map and noted *10 gilro*.

The only human settlements in that radius were Flatta and Nascúte.

Oh! We still hadn't checked out Nascúte.

"Hey, Laika, I know you checked Flatta out in the morning. Did you ask around Nascúte?"

Laika shook her head. "No. In order to reach Nascúte without passing through Flatta, one must take those disused roads, so...I thought that if they were to go in that direction, they would have passed through Flatta..."

Yeah. Laika's logic was sound. It was a lot easier to reach Nascúte and the towns beyond it by taking the well-maintained roads from Flatta.

"If they went straight to Nascúte from the house in the highlands, then they'd have to forge their way through the fields."

"Yes. I thought it was a path much too difficult for them."

"But not impossible. It isn't like there are any powerful monsters out there, and almost no one there knows who they are. Compared to in Flatta anyway."

"Lady Azusa, it is possible they went straight to Nascúte, but...Flatorte should have investigated that area and the roads beyond in the afternoon."

"Yeah. But what if they decided to stay in town?"

I was convinced now.

Well, I thought the same thing when it came to Beelzebub, but...this time, I was way more strongly convinced.

"Falfa and Shalsha are in Nascúte. More precisely, they're in Halkara's factory!"

"What?! Then we must raze Halkara's factory and search for them!"

"Don't!"

Beelzebub's demonic nature always reared its head when the girls were a part of the equation.

Laika still didn't seem wholly convinced.

I could understand, though. That alone made my conclusion sound somewhat improbable. *The way I'm explaining all of this is starting to sound confusing...*

“Lady Azusa, Miss Halkara was in the house with us yesterday when we discovered they ran away, and it did not seem as though she was trying to deceive us.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure she was wondering where they went at that time, too, just like the rest of us. But then, yesterday morning, after Flatorte took her to work, *that was when* she realized they were there.”

Laika gasped in realization.

“They left the note and then went straight to Nascúte before either you or Flatorte could spot them from the air. They killed some time in a place nobody would find them and then went to Halkara once the factory started up for the day.”

This sounded like the most reasonable way to run away from home.

“And if Halkara kept quiet, then they didn’t need to travel all the way to the Great Slime, and there’s a small chance they’d be found out. If Halkara told us they weren’t at the factory, then we wouldn’t exactly accuse her of lying and immediately go to the factory.”

Since they’d run away, they weren’t going to come back to the house in the highlands for a little while.

Running away was an act of rebellion; there was no point in it if they showed themselves so quickly.

That said, I knew from the way they worded their letter that they would be coming back eventually.

“Since they weren’t in Flatta, they’re in Nascúte. It’s close enough that if they left super early, they could have gotten there before we started looking.”

“Mm-hmm. A rather reasonable inference, I say! Now I suppose I shall gather the demons and head to the factory and—”

“Don’t escalate this!”

When Halkara gets home tonight, we’ll ask if the factory-hideout idea I had was right.

I really wanted this to be the right answer, but...even though I was confident

in my deduction, I was still a little worried, since there was no way to confirm it. If they weren't there, then I'd give up.

Laika and I arrived home, but no one had found Falfa or Shalsha yet. Beelzebub had said that now was not the time for her to return to the demon lands, so she tagged along.

In the end, dinnertime came without any sight of them.

The atmosphere was more weighty than usual, but that was to be expected. It wasn't enough to skip the evening meal, though.

"We will find her, Big Sis. It isn't easy, but you shouldn't get too down about it. People don't die that easily."

"I know, thanks. I appreciate the sentiment, Rosalie."

That said, I'd never heard of spirits dying before...

"In reality, the twins rarely ever stuck by Azusa's side all day long. Even when they studied, they did so by themselves quietly. I think they wanted more attention." Sandra sat in a chair.

She was probably right. When Sandra started to act more like a child, it served as a shock to Falfa and Shalsha's desire for attention.

"Everyone, thank you so much for helping me today. I have a feeling we'll find out the truth once Halkara comes home. I think they're in Nascúte." As their mother, I thanked everyone.

Then the door opened, right on time—Halkara and Flatorte were home.

First, Flatorte came in, wearing a clearly doubtful expression.

The reason for that became immediately clear.

Halkara was wearing a mask for some reason! I couldn't see her face, but I knew those clothes and that physique.

And the mask looked like a slime!

"Hello, it's me, the real Halkara."

"I'm not questioning that part—this is strange, even for you! What's with the mask?!"

“Oh, well, I got a bit of a cut on my face, so...I’m wearing one of the masks they sell in Nascúte. Yes. I am no slime, but the Halkara you know.”

She wasn’t just being suspicious—she was being outright weird!

“I don’t think you’ll be able to eat wearing a mask, Halkara. What are you going to do about that?”

“Good question... May I eat in my room?” She was doing all she could to avoid a conversation with me.

Wait a second. Yes, this was super strange, but if she was like this when she came home from work yesterday, then it would’ve come up in conversation. Flatorte would’ve informed us when we met up with her in the morning.

“Hey, Flatorte, what was Halkara acting like last night?”

“She was totally plastered when I went to pick her up. I thought she was drowning herself in alcohol when she couldn’t find the girls.”

It was odd that she’d decided to drink her sorrows away the very first day of this whole thing, and I honestly wished she’d stay sober to help us—but people deal with this stuff in different ways, so whatever.

More importantly—was getting drunk a tactic to ensure she couldn’t do or say anything suspicious?

I was going to get as much out of her as I could.

“Oh, at least sit with us until we’re done eating. I wanted to talk more about Falfa and Shalsha.”

“Oh... A-all right...”

Now that she couldn’t escape, Halkara sat uncomfortably in her chair. Her slime mask was still on.

This was supposed to be a serious talk, but now it was just starting to feel silly.

“So tomorrow, I want us to go to Nascúte and—”

Halkara’s shoulders jumped, tense.

She didn’t react until I’d said the word *Nascúte*... I could still tell, even with

that mask on. It was basically confirmed that she was involved with this; timing-wise, we were still talking about Falfa and Shalsha.

“—And do a focused search of the area. By cutting through the highlands, they could’ve gone directly to Nascúte without going through Flatta.”

“Hoooo, hooooo.” Halkara was taking deep breaths.

“Are you ill, Miss Halkara?” Laika was eyeing her doubtfully.

“Oh, no... Just that my mask is a little tight on my face, which makes it hard to breathe... My body is fine... I’m wonderful...”

“Shouldn’t you remove the mask if you are having trouble breathing?”

“No, no, I don’t want to show where I was wounded. I think you’d all rather see the neat, shiny slime instead. Ha-ha-ha...”

“What part of your face was hurt anyway?”

“If I had to say, the tip of my nose is itchy.”

That’s not an injury.

“Are you absolutely certain you are injured?”

“...I *feel* injured, at the very least. Injury is a very subjective word, you see.”

Why not shake her down a little more? Well, more like flipping her upside-down and shaking her like a rag doll...

I heaved a big, dramatic sigh and then covered my face with my hands.

“Ohh...Falfa, Shalsha, where did they go...? I hope they come home soon... I can’t take this anymore...” I peeked through the gaps in my fingers at Halkara. I could see sweat dripping down her neck.

Got her.

“|—|—|—|—|—|—|—| think...Fa-Fa-Fa-Falfa and Sha-Sha-Sha-Shalsha will c-c-c-c-come home.”

She sounded like a club remix!

“If one dared to kidnap them, then they do not deserve to live!” Beelzebub was providing backup. “They shall die a painful death! I shall pluck every one of

their fingernails myself before throwing them into the inferno of hell!”

Or was she just venting her honest opinion?

“K-k-k-kidnapping...? They’re simply hiding somewhere... I’m sure we’ll find them! Please, no need to threaten such horrible things...” Halkara was terrified of the punishment.

“It matters not to you, no? *You* will not be skewered or drowned within the mire. But *if* there were one who *did* indeed kidnap them, I shall simply make them pay.”

“Oh, I was just getting nervous with all those highly specific punishments... And by kidnapping, you mean taking them away against their will, right...? People who hid them away only because they asked are all right, aren’t they...?”

She was practically confessing!

“From my perspective, any who hides them away, willfully or not, is guilty. I shall cut open their stomach and string out their entrails. I shall make them regret ever having been born!”

“Well, I was thinking that hiding them away with *good* intentions would be different, you know~”

She was running straight toward rationalization now.

In all honesty, everyone already had the gist that the two were hiding in her factory. Flatorte and Halkara were staring at her in flat disbelief.

“Sis Halkara, I heard that if you lie, you’ll go to hell to be tortured when you die.”

“What an ominous thing to say, Miss Rosalie... If you lied and then got executed anyway, you’d have a terrible time in the afterlife. None of it would have been worth it...”

“That’s why you’re not supposed to lie. It’s better to confess.”

“O-oh no~ But then that would mean lying to someone else, wouldn’t it? When you assert that you will not tell anyone their whereabouts, going back on your word would be lying, too... Do you know how hard it is to please everyone...?”

It sounded like she'd promised not to tell us where Falfa and Shalsha were. But she was spilling everything anyway, so we were getting an even clearer picture.

Actually, she was kind of a victim in this situation... She was being forced to lie to us, after all.

If she came home and told us that the twins were at the factory, then she would resolve the matter but lose their trust. This was between a rock and a hard place, for sure.

I was certain at this point her coming home drunk yesterday was a way for her to make absolutely sure she wouldn't let it slip.

"Sorry, Halkara," I apologized.

"Ex-exactly. If you'd only taken better care of them, Madam Teacher, then things would not have gotten this out of hand. You know they wish they hadn't run away. Please just make amends already. I can't handle this anymore~"

"Wow, it sounds like you know everything."

She was awful at lying.

"Oh, that was...just me babbling. I'm not well."

"I thought you said you were fine and wonderful!"

"Don't you know people say they're fine when they aren't?!"

She was desperate now!

"Okay, we know they're in your factory! Just tell us the truth! It's really obvious already!" I yelled.

It was plain enough that it didn't matter if she said it or not at this point.

Halkara slowly took off her mask to reveal a tortured expression.

She leaned forward until her forehead met the table, like a sitting bow of apology.

"You're right! That is exactly right! Please don't make me lie! I tried wearing a mask to hide my expressions, but this task was too much for me!"

“Even if you were hiding your expressions, the mask made it obvious something was off!”

“I did my best! I’ll get an ulcer if I lie anymore! I’m done!”

She’d barely even tricked us to begin with.

“I can’t believe you found a mask like that...” Of all the things Sandra could have found astonishing about this...

“They don’t sell these in Nascúte, by the way. It’s mine. As a merchant, I sometimes need to hide my expressions.”

But it was pointless if the other party was just going to think she was weird.

Anyway, now we knew exactly where Falfa and Shalsha were.

“Laika, could you take me to Nascúte right now? Mama needs to go pick them up.”

“Yes! Of course, I—”

“I am coming, too!”

And *now* Beelzebub was getting excited?!

Things would get complicated if she came along, so I told her no.

Nascúte was only five minutes away on a dragon’s back. After alighting from Laika, it would be just under a ten-minute walk to the factory. But even those ten minutes felt like too much.

I couldn’t emotionally prepare myself in time.

First, I’ll hug them out of relief. Yeah, that’ll be good. But I can’t be totally happy about it. I have to scold them for causing us so much pain. Even if they had their reasons, they caused everyone else besides me to worry.

And Halkara had to lie to the rest of us, although she basically confessed immediately...

I had to do both of these things. It’s not a mother’s job to spoil a child with everything they want. I’d just be the same as Beelzebub. I had to say no when no was the right thing to say.

“But I don’t really want to scold them... I don’t want them to be scared of me...”

“Lady Azusa, you’re thinking out loud...”

“It’s okay—you’re the only one who can hear me up here!”

As we spoke, the lights of Nascúte came into view.



When we arrived at the factory, I spotted some light spilling out from the back of the building.

The factory should have been closed for the day, so that was proof that Falfa and Shalsha were here.

I took the key Halkara lent me to unlock the building and step inside.

It was dark, but I didn’t want to scare them away by turning on the lights, so I decided to just go straight in.

Laika followed close behind.

I arrived at the door where a sliver of light streamed from the gap at the bottom.

I placed my hand on the knob and waited. Initially, I was just trying to calm down, but I heard voices.

“I wanna go home already...,” Falfa whined.

“It hasn’t been long enough, Sis. This is how it works. Now that we started, we need to see it to completion.”

Meanwhile, Shalsha was oddly strict about this.

“But you want to go back to Mommy, too, Shalsha. It’s day two. Hasn’t it been long enough?”

“That goes without saying. But people only acknowledge what they have when it’s gone. So...we had to run away so Mom would know just how irreplaceable we are. We must lose this battle to win the war.”

“But now Falfa knows how lonely it is without Mommy around...”

“...Shalsha thinks you do not need to say everything you think out loud.”

They were desperate to come home already—and it was time to make their wishes come true.

I’d see them first and then decide if I should scold them.

I opened the door.

The two looked at me, and their eyes immediately pooled with tears.

I leaped at them, and they reached out to hug me back.

“Mommy!” “Mom!”

“I know, what you two did was very elaborate, so it took some time to find you.” I squeezed them tighter. “I really, really know how you feel, but you can’t worry me like this, okay? You’ve never done anything like this before, so Mommy forgives you. And I didn’t handle this very well, either, so we’re even. Okay?”

““Okay!””

In true twin-like fashion, they replied at the same time.

“But you also caused trouble for everyone else, you know. This wasn’t just between you and me. So when you see the others, be sure to say sorry. Can you do that?”

They nodded with tears streaking down their faces.

I knew running away hadn’t been the right answer here; it only caused problems for all of us.

“Ohh... Such a harmonious sight is bringing me to tears, too...”

Laika seemed rather touched by this, as well, and she was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. It was a little embarrassing, but she was family.



And if we're talking about embarrassments, I was more embarrassed that my daughters ran away from me.

I haven't been a mom for very long. Even though my level in battle and whatnot is high, I'm still low-level in the realm of parenthood. It's not like I've been doing this for three hundred years; I still have plenty of room to grow.

"I'm going to keep leveling up as a mom. So you two level up as daughters, too, okay?"

The two were bawling already, so they could hardly answer. But I could tell right away that they agreed. Sometimes, the bond between parent and child was enough to know.



When we got back to the house in the highlands, Falfa and Shalsha apologized to everyone.

None of them rejected their apology, so that was that.

But I had a feeling Beelzebub was crying more than me...

"If you ever go through a hard time again, you must come to me. I will help you, no matter what... Running away from home is dangerous, so do not do it again."

She really was trying to be their parent! I really had to be careful she didn't snatch them away... What a jerk, capitalizing on this whole situation.

Afterward, Falfa and Shalsha very politely apologized to Sandra. They were right to feel like they needed to explain themselves to her.

"It really isn't your fault, Sandra."

"We were very immature about this, and that's what caused everything."

"It's all right," Sandra replied. "You may throw more tantrums—you are children, after all. One could say it's a young animal's role in life."

I wasn't so sure about her word choice there, but I guess I could call this neatly resolved.

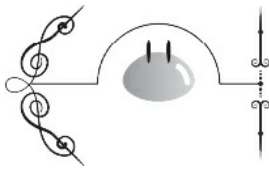
Afterward, we had a little celebration to commemorate their coming home.

Everyone was all together anyway, and I was thankful for that. That was enough to celebrate every day.

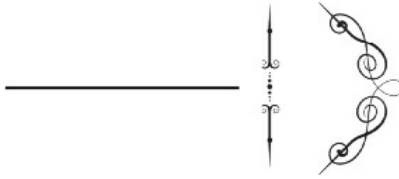
I'd been alive for over three hundred years, but there was still a lot more I had to learn. I'd take motherhood one day at a time.

Meanwhile, Halkara was exclaiming, "A toast to homecoming!"

And then she got wasted. She'd been a big victim here, too, so she could drink all she wanted without worry for the future today.



WE CAUGHT THE SWAMP CRYSTAL



“I wonder what slimes taste like~” Halkara mused during dinner.

“Hold on, Halkara, just sit still for a second.” I placed my hand on her forehead.

“...Um, Madam Teacher? What are you doing?”

“Nope, no fever. But that still doesn’t make me feel better. You sure you didn’t eat any poison mushrooms? The kind that make you all hazy and say weird things?”

Or was her work at the factory surprisingly intense lately? No, she hadn’t seemed any more stressed than usual. And the managers of the company doesn’t get as much stress. The employees die from overwork because they’re forced to do too much.

“You’re terrible, Madam Teacher! I haven’t had any mushrooms today or yesterday!”

“So you asked about how slimes taste in a perfectly sound state of mind...” In a way, that was a bigger problem.

“I just suddenly wondered. It’s just a nice, random topic for a peaceful family get-together~”

“I don’t think it’s a nice topic, no. You know there are slime spirits in our family, right?”

Although if someone asked me if Falfa and Shalsha were cute enough to eat, I would say yes.

“Oh, that’s not what I intended! I would never try to take a nibble of Falfa or Shalsha!” Halkara immediately explained. She was awful at lying (see also: that thing not long ago with the mask), so I believed her.

Falfa and Shalsha didn’t seem particularly shocked about this, either; they just ate their burgers. They quickly dispatched any evil slimes when they found them, so they probably didn’t really consider themselves slimes.

“Big Sis Halkara, why do you want to eat a slime~?” Falfa asked the obvious question. There was a bit of sauce on her cheek.

“See, slimes are so bouncy, I sometimes think they look like a yummy snack. That is why I suddenly wondered if they’d taste like one, too.”

That description sounded like gummies.

“Madam Teacher came up with the edible slimes snack, too, so I wondered if real slimes are sweet~”

“I just added faces to them to give them a bit more visual impact, though...” The name *manju* would be a harder sell than slimes here.

“What a fascinating conversation. However, eating slimes is difficult.”

Shalsha had some sauce on her cheek, too. She was very calm as she ate, but it wasn’t going all that well for her.

“Because slimes are monsters. And once monsters die, they become magic stones. One cannot eat stones. And since slimes are weak, they will die the moment you bite into them.”

I patted Halkara on the shoulder.

“I just imagined you biting into a wild slime, then it turning into a stone, and you chipping a tooth. That’s not safe, so don’t do it, okay?”

“I am an adult, Madam Teacher. I do those things only a few times a year.”

“So you *do* do them.”

That was still a lot.

“Either way, it still sounds bad if it got into your stomach, then turned into a magic stone... You really shouldn’t try that.”

That would mean surgery at least, or in the worst-case scenario, a life-threatening situation.

“Okaaay. I did want to know what they taste like, though. Or at least what sort of texture they have. I have a feeling they might lead to the development of a new product.”

Now that she mentioned it, I didn’t ever recall seeing any gelatinous food in this world. A snack like that would be revolutionary.

“I feel your enthusiasm; just don’t get too excited about actually eating slimes. Maybe don’t think about it.”

“Yeah, Big Sis Halkara, you shouldn’t try anything you don’t have to. You can’t eat monsters.”

“There is an old idiom that goes: like eating slimes. It means something futile.”

Both the twins and I talked Halkara out of eating slimes. All bets were off for other inedible things, though...

After dinner, when I was taking a bath, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

“Madam Teacher, there’s someone I want you to introduce me to!”

“Why are you asking me this now?!”

“Well, I took off all my clothes as I was getting ready to go in the bath, then once I was naked, I realized, oh, someone’s in there already.”

That was a trope straight out of an old romantic comedy... I had absolutely no idea people actually did that stuff... It was pretty obvious someone was in here, because the lights were on.

“When I looked down at my chest, I recalled the slimes.”

Your boobs made you think of slimes? “Well, you’ll just get sick waiting out there, so come on in.”

I couldn’t tell her to just wait outside. She was literally standing there; her body was ready. I couldn’t relax like this.

“All right, then. I’m coming in~”

Halkara splashed herself with some water, then entered the bath. It was big enough to fit multiple people, so she had no trouble squeezing in. The bath got bigger when Laika remodeled the house. Even though I had no idea I’d end up with such a big family at the time.

“So who is it you want me to introduce to you?”

I had a lot of contacts, in a sense. Not a whole ton, granted, but they were quite diverse—demons, spirits, poltergeists, gods. Regular humans were actually few and far between.

“First, let me explain my reasoning. Since I cannot eat slimes, I wondered if there were any non-monster creatures that are also similar to slimes that I could eat. To be honest, I am much more interested in the texture rather than the flavor.”

“What a strange thing to wonder about... I mean, that’s not really bad, but...,” I replied as I stared at Halkara’s chest. Her boobs were big, but I wouldn’t go so far as to call them slimes. Yeah, definitely not. They’d just get in the way if they were that big.

“I was thinking about any squishy creatures, and I came to one.”

I wonder what it was?

“That is...jellyfish!” Halkara exclaimed. “Please introduce me to Curalina, the jellyfish spirit!”

Jellyfish, eh?

I guess that made sense. They definitely had that round, squishy image to them, and some types were edible. Some Chinese appetizers had the crunchy kind in them.

But those crunchy kinds needed to be desiccated to get that texture... I had a feeling eating them with all the water still in them would be impossible.

“So even if you could eat jellyfish, I don’t think you could eat them while they’re still squishy...”

“I will cross that bridge when I come to it! There is significance in the

attempt!”

Halkara’s passion won me over, and I decided to introduce her to Curalina.



A few days later, I took Halkara to Momma Yufufu’s house.

“—So, Momma Yufufu, could you introduce Curalina?”

I couldn’t exactly set up a direct meeting with the jellyfish spirit, so I asked Momma Yufufu to set us up. I had no idea where she’d be anyway...

Since she was the jellyfish spirit, I heard she rarely ever returned to her home island, either.

I also heard she’d lived for such a long time that I was just a blip on her timeline, so she probably got bored at home.

“I see. I don’t mind setting you up with her.” Surprisingly, Momma Yufufu didn’t seem all that interested. If anything, she seemed disconcerted.

“You want to eat jellyfish, right? I have a feeling she might not take this well.”

“You’re right... She might think we’re being rude.”

In the past, she’d moved the jellyfish out of the way when we went swimming at the beach, but she didn’t kill any of them.

“Well, I suppose it won’t hurt to ask. It’s so hard to tell what she’s thinking, after all.”

It sounded like Curalina was unique, even among the spirits...

“Thank you! Once I start thinking of something, I can’t stop until I try it!” Halkara bowed. I guess everyone in the family was a little reckless, so I wasn’t going to say anything more on the matter.

“Of course. Then I’ll go call her, okay? Hold on for a second,” Momma Yufufu said before leaving the house.

Thirty seconds later.

“We’re back~”

Momma Yufufu entered the house with Curalina right behind her. This had

happened in the past, but it was still surprisingly quick...

“...It’s nice to see you. Are you hoping for a painting? Jellyfish-fish-fish.”

Oh, she thought we’d called her here as a painter.

“I just completed my quadriptych, *Despair*, and I’m about to start on my next one. I call it *Boredom*.”

She could place all the paintings she wanted in a museum, but I wasn’t so keen on putting art with those titles in my house...

I lightly pushed Halkara forward. It was her job to do the hard part.

“I am Halkara the elf. Today, I have a request for Curalina, the jellyfish spirit...”

Halkara couldn’t bring herself to suddenly start off with eating jellyfish, of course, so she started with her original issue of eating slimes.

“And so, can you eat jellyfish?! Please tell me if you know any good ones... B-but if it’s not possible, then I’ll leave it at that...”

“...” Curalina was silent for a while.

Was she angry? She didn’t show any emotion, so it was hard to tell. I actually had no idea.

“So you called me here for jellyfish, not paintings.”

She was disappointed! But she was the jellyfish spirit, so shouldn’t she be okay with this?!

“I don’t care if you eat jellyfish or not. They don’t seem to have any nutritional value. I won’t stop you.”

It didn’t sound like she had any problem with it, but I wanted to confirm just in case. “So you’re all right with the act of eating jellyfish itself, right?”

“Jellyfish don’t think, so they’re the same to me as all the other creatures roaming around the wilderness. I’m not the queen of jellyfish or anything.”

There you have it: The jellyfish spirit has no interest in jellyfish.

“I can still communicate telepathically with them, though.”

“So you *can* communicate with them!”

“But they don’t think, so it isn’t much of a conversation. It’s been like that for seventy thousand years.”

I guess she gave up trying to act like a spirit a long time ago.

“I understand what you’re going through. If you want a standin for slimes, then I should show you some that live in ponds and swamps. I’ll tell you where they are; you’re free to boil them or fry them or however you like. And they’re rather difficult to capture, so I’ll help. Please bring your own net.”

She was going to help us. But there was still something I wasn’t satisfied with...

The opposite of love really is apathy...

We picked a day to go to a swamp with jellyfish types similar to slimes.



We got a net and went to the swamp.

Coming along with us were the very interested Falfa and Shalsha, and our transport, Laika.

“This is but a normal swamp, Lady Azusa...”

“Yeah. And I really wonder if jellyfish live in swamps. I guess I never thought about freshwater jellyfish before.”

Curalina was lying down at the swamp’s edge. She wasn’t collapsed or anything—that was just how she was waiting. It was hard to tell what was going through the jellyfish spirit’s brain. Or maybe it was just an artist thing.

“Um, Curalina? We’re here.”

“Oh, hello.”

She slowly sat up. There was nothing I could use to measure her blood pressure, but she definitely had hypotension.

“Did you bring a net?”

“Yes! We got one just for today!” Halkara proudly showed off the net.

Since she brought it up first, I’d let her go first. “Then throw it into the swamp and pull.”

“That’s rather simple...” It sounded like she thought the same. “But all right! I’ll do it! Hoi!” She threw the net into the swamp, and the weights pulled it right down into the mire.

We’d find all kinds of stuff once we pulled it up. I wasn’t really interested in catching swamp things, though... I could just imagine what kind of nasty junk was down there.

After a little while, Halkara pulled on the net.

“Here I go! Hrrrgh, hrrrgh...” She was pulling as hard as she could, but the net wouldn’t budge. “It’s so unbelievably heavy! It won’t move!”

Either it was simply caught on something, or she’d netted something massive.

Curalina simply sat staring at the swamp and didn’t really bother to explain anything.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “Laika, help me out here.”

Between the three of us, we should be able to get it out.

“Understood, Lady Azusa!”

Laika and I stood behind Halkara and pulled on the net. It had to move with me and Laika pulling, even if it broke. Fortunately, the net came up whole.

Now, what did we get?!

The twins peered at the haul with great interest.

Inside were some fish that lived in the swamp. No surprises there. A shoe. Yep, some trash, too...

Then we started spotting some weirder things in our catch—for one, a sort of clear jelly that briefly fooled me into thinking we’d pulled up some of the water itself!

“What is this?!”

It was just about as big as a seat on a carriage.

And there were several of them. It was hard to tell if they were alive or not.

“Wow~ So pretty~ They’re clear, even though they were in the muddy

swamp~”

“One could liken them to a slime, but they are wholly different. They do not move on their own.”

Just as my scholarly girls analyzed, what we got was a large, clear object.

“Ooh! We did it! This certainly is very slime-like!”

Halkara was thrilled by the results. Good thing, too, after all this.

Curalina, on the other hand, was as blah as ever. It was better than before, when she was lying down, though.

“That’s a jellyfish called the swamp crystal. It sinks to the bottom of the swamp, absorbs nutrients in the water, and stays put. Not sure what’s so fun about that. Kind of worthless, if you ask me.”

What a heartless thing to say of a fellow jellyfish... But some creatures really didn’t move at all.

Halkara went straight for the swamp crystals, brimming with curiosity. “Oh, it does smell a bit after all that time in the swamp, but it looks pretty. I wonder if it absorbs any mud. But...I hesitate to bite into something like this that’s been sitting at the bottom of a bog... I want to rinse it off with clean water first...”

That was just common sense.

“You’ll definitely get sick if you just bite into it. Let’s take it to a clean river or something. Can we even carry it, though...?”

I wondered if all its water would come rushing out if we tried to pick it up. It seemed so delicate.

“I wonder. Let me try picking up one. I think I can manage just one.” Halkara knelt, leaned forward, and placed both hands on one swamp crystal. I had a feeling it would be way too heavy for her to pick up...

But in the next moment, something strange happened.

Halkara’s hands slowly sank into the swamp crystal! “Ahhh! I’m stuck!” she exclaimed without much worry. “Oh, I suppose it was too soft~ If I can’t use my hands, then I guess I’ll pull it off and put it in a box or something.”

That's definitely not the trouble I was imagining—I thought she'd hurt it, not the other way around.

She turned to me with a look of panic on her face. "I can't...get my hands out! I think it's pulling me in instead! It's so strong..."

"What?! The swamp crystal is attacking *you*?!"

"I don't know if it's an attack, but it's pulling me in!"

Slowly, the swamp crystal absorbed Halkara...until everything but her face was inside it.

She looked like a street performer who'd put herself inside a balloon for show, but this was probably more serious than that.

"Ahhhhhh! What is going on?! I think it's trying to digest me...!"

"This is bad, Lady Azusa! We must save Miss Halkara!"

"You're right, Laika! But I'm afraid of attacking it directly, so I wish I had a weapon..."

I had a feeling either Laika or I could take it down in one hit, but we couldn't say with certainty that we wouldn't get sucked in like her.

This was an unfamiliar creature, after all, so I had no idea what it would do.

"Understood! I will go fetch a stick!" Laika broke off a nearby tree branch.

In the meantime, I begged Curalina for an explanation of all this. "Uh, so, question: Is Halkara all right? I didn't think this thing would be so violent..."

Curalina was still just standing there, but that wasn't exactly reassuring. Even if the world was burning, she would just stand and stare. "She's all right. Her life is not in danger. The swamp crystal cannot absorb all the nutrients a person contains."

That was what I wanted to hear.

"Really? I trust you! Don't come back to me later and say you were lying!"

"You might drown if you were caught by a swamp crystal while it's in the swamp, but it's fine when it's on the ground. They say legends across the globe of the bottomless swamps are in part due to the swamp crystal. Jellyfish-fish-

fish.”

I wished she’d told us that ahead of time.

“Madam Teacher, it doesn’t hurt all that much, and I don’t feel any weaker, either!” Halkara herself confirmed her safety.

“Good. Then we shouldn’t have a problem saving you.”

“Yes. I feel a bit itchy, but nothing to worry about. I can’t move very much, so I will wait for my rescue!”

We needed to get her free, but it wasn’t a huge deal if her life wasn’t in danger.

Then, just as Laika returned, wielding a big stick—

“Miss Halkara, I am here to save you! If we use this stick to impale the creature—”

Pop! The swamp crystal spit Halkara out. Well, maybe *spit* wasn’t the right phrasing for that, but she had been ejected from the swamp crystal’s body.

She shot straight up in the air like a pop-up pirate, then landed.

“Oh, I got out. Ah! Miss Laika, please don’t stab me!!”

Halkara’s head was real close to connecting directly with the stick, but Laika prevented it.

“I’m relieved to see you safe, Miss Halkara.”

“Thank you! I thought that liquid would melt off my clothes!”

What a strangely specific worry.

“I’m back, safe and sound! But I do very much appreciate your attempt to save me, Miss Laika!” Halkara hugged Laika. Yes, yes, all’s well that ends well.

“Of course! I would do anything to help my family. But...Miss Halkara...?” After a brief show of pride on her face, Laika’s expression changed, and she looked away. “You’re a bit slimy...”

“Is that so...? Is it because I was in the swamp crystal?”

Glad she didn’t come to hug me...



We took a few swamp crystals home as samples and saved them at the back of the house in boxes filled with water.

I would leave Halkara in charge of dealing with them.

But when it came around to dinnertime, another strange thing happened.

Halkara didn't come to dinner.

That was weird. I thought I saw her go back to her room... Don't tell me some latent poison kicked in and she's unconscious...?

I hurriedly flung open the door to her room.

"Halkara, are you okay?!"

"Yes, I am all right."

She didn't seem to be in pain at all, so I didn't think she was being affected by any jellyfish poison, but there was something else strange going on.

For some reason, she had her legs folded in the lotus position, like in zazen style, with her hands folded down by her stomach.

Her eyes were closed, too, so was she really doing Zen meditation...?

But I didn't know of any religions in this world that needed you to sit like that and meditate... Well, people here could sit like that if they wanted to. If they had the arms and legs for it.

"Um, Halkara? Dinner's ready. What are you doing anyway?"

"I am practicing asceticism to find enlightenment."

Halkara spoke in a calm voice. Normally, I'd assume she was being silly.

"You've never done any asceticism before. What brought this on? Were you influenced by some business book that told you that managers should be more aware?"

It reminded me of people who were making a lot of money suddenly caring about the environment and stuff.

"No reason. In fact, no reason is necessary. Once one thinks of engaging in

ascetic practices, that is when one should begin. Asceticism is not a practice to be approached after extensive preparations.”

Wow, that was some pretty deep awareness...

“Would you like to start, Madam Teacher?” Halkara opened her eyes.

They were sparkling!

What is going on?! She’s completely different!

“The world is full of unsightly things, yet letting this unsightliness control you will not bring a fruitful life. By calming the heart, one will start to see the truth of this world.”

What she was saying sounded pretty good, but it was extremely fishy coming from her.

“Halkara, are you sure you haven’t been secretly snacking on some crazy mushrooms? I have a feeling you’re under...some kind of influence, or in some kind of trouble.”

Always question the mushrooms first when it comes to Halkara.

“I haven’t eaten any such thing. I would fight the entire world to prove the truth of this. I do not tell lies.”

Please don’t fight the whole world over something like that.

“Okay, so it’s not a mushroom, so something must have sparked this, right? Tell me. I’m more scared of not knowing than I am of any mushroom...”

“A spark—you mean the chance presented to me to walk the path of enlightenment?”

Seriously, no need to reword everything I say. And that definitely is not what I’m talking about.

I could see the wheels in her head turning. Considering how terrible she was at acting, it was probably best to assume she was serious.

“Yes, perhaps it was when I had been sucked into the swamp crystal’s body. It felt as though all my worldly attachments had dissolved within the swamp crystal. When I emerged, I was reborn.”

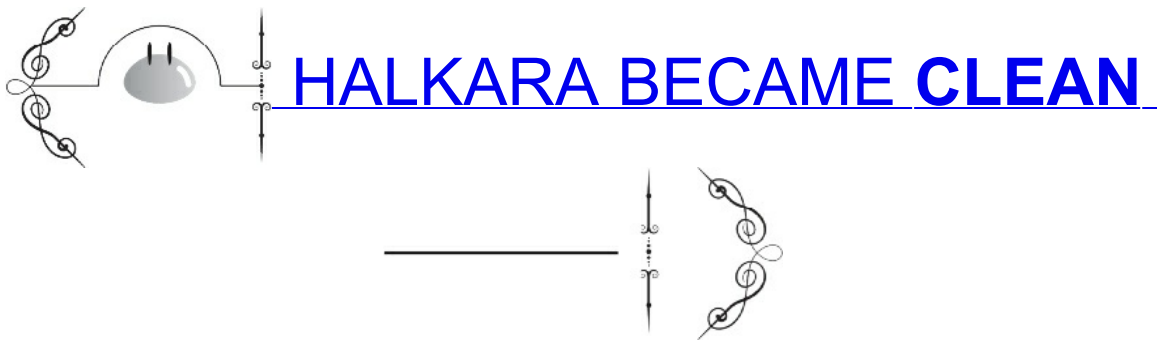
“That’s it!”

It was almost 100 percent due to the swamp crystal. That was the only noteworthy event in this short amount of time. And since Halkara was the only one who’d gotten sucked in, it made sense that she was the only one affected.

Curalina had said that getting sucked in wouldn’t put her life in danger, nor would it take away any of her strength. That was the truth.

But maybe it’d taken away all the “sullied” parts of her heart?





The swamp crystals were creatures that lived in swamps. One could say they were hardy enough to live in such dirty places, but maybe they absorbed nutrients from the muddy water itself.

The reason swamps were so clouded was because all kinds of gunk sank to the bottom. Gunk full of nutrients.

In short, the swamp crystals fed on those impurities—and ate the “dirtied” parts of Halkara’s heart.

Does that even count as nutrition? Well, this was a world where spirits walked around like it was no big deal, so I would believe in creatures that received nutrition from people’s sullied hearts.

I wanted to do something about this, but also, dinner was ready. I’d deal with this later. It didn’t seem like anything was wrong with Halkara’s health anyway.

“Halkara, dinner is ready, so can you put your asceticism on pause and come to the dining room?”

“You are providing me alms, I see. I shall gladly receive them.”

Okay, now that sounded like a lie... Yeah, definitely sounded fake to me.

I finally managed to bring her to the table.

Even as we walked down the hall, she had her hands in a weird position.

“Family, let us receive our food as we give thanks to our life in the midst of nature. Thank you, vegetables. Thank you, meat.” Halkara gracefully thanked every plate on the table.

“Halkara’s broken. Bet she ate a poison mushroom,” Flatorte immediately decided.

Not too long ago, Flatorte had turned into a model child after she’d used up too much of her cold breath, so she wasn’t in a position to say much. Although Good Girl Halkara was nothing like Good Girl Flatorte.

“So Halkara got sucked into one of the swamp crystals, which seems to have cleaned her heart and mind, apparently...”

I gave a quick rundown of the swamp crystal incident.

“I see. She is indeed much calmer than I would usually expect her to be.” I had a feeling Laika approved of the current situation.

“Yes. I live life ready to wait as long and as still as need be.”

“Well, whatever... Let’s just eat... Later, I’ll ask Momma Yufufu to ask Curalina if there’s a cure (?).”

Halkara hadn’t been in the crystal for hours, so I didn’t think her personality was going to be replaced by something totally different.

—But then, Halkara suddenly shot out of her seat.

Now what?

“Aah! Miss Rosalie, you are doomed to wander this earth, never free of your enmity!” She was facing upward toward the ceiling where Rosalie was floating.

“Huh? Sis Halkara, what’s going on?”

“I shall send you to heaven. Jugem, jugem gokonos rikire!” She started reciting a strange incantation.

“Hrgh-ghaaaa! I-it hurts... I feel my chest clenching...” Rosalie was thrashing and wriggling!

“Whoa, hey! Stop, Halkara! I don’t think you’ll be able to undo that!”

“Ghosts should not exist in this world. Though I am still undergoing ascetic training, it is nevertheless my role to lead her to where she belongs.”

“No it isn’t! Seriously, stop! Stop the spell!”

I clapped my hand over Halkara's mouth from behind, managing to stop the act.

Rosalie's pain vanished, and she came back to life (is it okay to use that phrase with ghosts?).

"Phew... I thought I was gonna die." Rosalie was using some questionable phrasing, too... "I saw the light for a second. So bright, like it was always midday. Was that heaven?"

"You were a second away from leaving us!"

We really needed to be careful of how we treated Rosalie... I was pretty sure she was mostly freed from any of her hatred at this point...

Okay, right. Back to dinner.

"Oh no! Madam Teacher, this cannot be!" Halkara screamed again.

Now what?!

"This knife is not made of metal, is it?!"

Sitting in front of Halkara was a wooden spoon and a metal knife.

"Uh, yeah," I said. "What about it?"

"Metal! Oh! The source of the horrid coin, the tempter and beguiler of so many! The coin is a detestable invention, the cause of betrayal among so many people!"

Now what the hell is she on about?!

"Coin is no more than metal minted into circles, yet many people mistakenly believe the purpose of life to be collecting them. No matter how much one may have, it is still nothing but metal. One cannot use them to buy tranquility of the mind. Nutri-Spirits will not bring spiritual fulfillment!"

She was insulting her own product!

"Even if one did find some peace of mind with more money, it would only invite in the dark shadow of suspicion. And those with less begin to envy those who have more. How tragic..."

Sure, that might be true, but Halkara's opinions right now were a little

extreme.

“For so long, I have spent most of my days collecting money as a company president. It was all for naught... I should have started on the path of enlightenment sooner... O gods, please forgive me...”

She was starting to rethink her past. This transformation was more radical than I initially thought.

“There are some good things about money, Halkara.”

“There are not,” she snapped.

“Well, think what you want. Eat your dinner.”

“No, I must not touch this metal knife! My hands will rot away if I do!”

“It’s not cursed!”

Hrrrm... This is getting a little extreme...

“Halkara, you can’t buy anything without money. You can’t eat anything. We need money.”

“I want to live without ever using it. To be more specific, I will fill my belly from samples at the sample food corner.”

“Cheapskate! Way to bother the store!”

At least grow your own vegetables.

“Then...don’t use the knife. Just eat. Some cultures eat with their hands.”

“Very well. Then that is what I shall do!” Halkara stuck her hands in her soup.
“Ow! Now my hand shall rot away!”

“That’s because you shoved it in hot liquid!”

And the spoon is wooden, so just use that, please?

“I still need more training. My hand will burn if I place it in hot soup. I am yet far from enlightenment.”

Does enlightenment protect you from soup burns?

“You’re dumb. It’s because you didn’t cool it with cold breath.”

Flatorte, you're the only one who can do that, but you're on the right track anyway.

Afterward, Halkara proceeded to have a normal dinner—or so I thought, but she said things like “I will not eat meat,” which only added to the trouble. She was the one who’d said “Thank you, meat” earlier! Or maybe the influence over her was getting stronger...

After dinner, Falfa told me honestly how she felt. “Mommy, Miss Halkara’s being weird...”

This couldn’t go on any longer.

“I know. I’ll do something about it, so just hang in there, okay?”



I brought Halkara to Momma Yufufu and asked her to call up Curalina.

Curalina emerged from the next room with a really sleepy look on her face. Maybe she’d already gone to bed.

“What is it? Sleepyfish-fish-fish...”

She’s still sleepy!

“Halkara’s personality changed ever since she got sucked into the swamp crystal. Do you know a way to put her back?”

Curalina stayed silent for a while.

I wanted her to hurry up and say something, but I didn’t want to bother her too much. So I decided to wait.

She then pulled out a painting from her bag. “Look at this.”

It was a horrible picture—a whole crowd of people gleefully throwing rocks at a person clenching their head in despair. Curalina sure painted the darkest art...

“Okay, I looked at it. What are you trying to say...?”

“Humankind’s folly—no, the folly of all living creatures—knows no bounds. It is like a deep swamp. It has been the same for seventy thousand years, ever since I was born. The swamp crystal only absorbs a tiny portion of that folly, nothing beyond the reasonable limits of error.”

Oh, so she was using the picture as an aid.

“So then how do we put her back to normal?”

“...What happens to food, once eaten, when it is removed from the stomach?”

“It becomes vomit and excreta. Foul,” Halkara, who’d come along with me, replied right away. She did vomit often when she drank too much...

“Precisely. Once the swamp crystal has absorbed something, it will not come back. Jellyfish-fish-fish.”

So is Halkara going to stay like this forever...? I’m not so keen on that...

“Miss Curalina, may I accompany you on your wandering journey? I want to see the wider world! The elven forests are obstructed by trees, so I want to see all that I was never able to! Emancipation!”

Halkara was getting extra weird again!

“Don’t. You’d be a bother,” Curalina shot her down. She ignored Halkara and came to stand in front of me. “It’s nothing to worry about. No simple jellyfish could completely clean a person of their folly. Jellyfish are, in the end, jellyfish.”

“Should you be insulting jellyfish like that...?”

“I was emphasizing humankind’s folly, which means it was people I was insulting.”

Okay, fine. Still dissing jellyfish, though.

But I understood that she was trying to comfort me—I think she was trying to say time was going to solve this problem.

“But...there is one thing I refrained from telling you.” Curalina’s head drooped.

Uh-oh, hope it’s not anything too ominous!

“Swamp crystals are creatures of an entirely different type from jellyfish... But considering how they are often confused for jellyfish, I took them under my jurisdiction.”

“Spirits sure are sloppy when it comes to this stuff!”

“Still, swamp crystals are a type of tiny bug. It is still nothing you need to worry about. They cannot win against humankind’s folly. Jellyfish-fish-fish...,” Curalina said. With that, she left.

I had a feeling she’d told me something profound, but it didn’t solve anything.

“Indeed. No matter how much time passes, only a small proportion of people reach enlightenment. But realizing one’s own foolishness is an important first step.” Halkara patted me on the shoulder. “Perhaps we will soon reach the starting line.” She smiled.

“I’m trying to fix you, but you’re consoling me instead?! I don’t get it!” I sighed. “I guess we just have to wait for her to recover...”

Halkara didn’t seem to be having trouble with her daily life, so we *could* just wait for it to go away, but I knew we were in for a headache in the intervening days...

“Oh, Azusa, cheer up. Curalina said it will resolve itself rather quickly.” Momma Yufufu offered some words of comfort.

“Yeah. But I have a feeling Curalina’s sense of time says that a few centuries counts as ‘quick’...”

She herself said she’d been alive for seventy thousand years...

“Oh, you may be right~ I can see that~”

If Halkara stayed like this for three hundred years, I think I’d lose my mind...



The following morning, a new problem presented itself.

“Miss Halkara, you will be late if we don’t leave the house soon!”

“I do not need to make any money! The path of a company president leads away from enlightenment!”

Halkara refused to go to work at the factory. Laika was telling her it was time to go, but Halkara wouldn’t give her the time of day. She was just sitting with her arms folded.

“Laika, go ahead and tell the employees that the president is going to be out

today. Things should still be operational even with her gone. I know the normal Halkara's done well to account for things like that."

"You may be right... The company would get thrown into chaos if she went to work like this."

I wholeheartedly agreed. It would be a huge problem if this version of Halkara went to work and told all her employees they should stop working, or if she went around firing them all. In that case, it was better she stayed put.

That was when she emerged carrying a thick stack of papers that looked like company documents.

Was she back to normal now? Had her previous values come back now that she was thinking about Halkara Pharmaceuticals?

"I cannot run this company! I give it to any one of you!"

She was about to throw the papers, but I hurriedly stopped her. "You can't just give up something like that! You have to keep it!"

I can't let her near her company until she gets better...

"But we are naked the moment we are born. No one is born with a coin in the palm. And yet, we come to learn many unnecessary values and thus desire ownership over many things. Owning an entire company requires a lifestyle distant from enlightenment."

We weren't getting anywhere.

But then something suddenly came to me. There was one thing I could try instead of worrying until I lost my mind.

"Kaaaaaaaaatsu! Hah!"

I yelled at her like she was a Zen practitioner.

Halkara stiffened like a board.

"Listen to your teacher's words, Halkara! You are rushing to throw away all you own. Isn't that a form of preoccupation with yourself?"

"That is precisely correct, Madam Teacher!"

I knew it. I was wondering if she would listen to what her *teacher* had to say,

and I succeeded.

But I wasn't her "teacher" in that sense... More of an herbs teacher.

"Now that you mention it, there is a saying: If you are served tea, drink it. It is important we live our lives as we are. There is also the saying: When spring comes, grass grows of its own accord."

I didn't know if that was a real idiom, but it made sense enough to her.

Things were getting strange enough with her just staying at home...

Rosalie was clearly avoiding her, too. "Whenever I get close to Sis Halkara, I feel my heart get all warm, like I'm about to go somewhere else..."

So our resident elf was now apparently exuding some kind of saintly power...

"Then I will return to practicing asceticism in my room. There is another saying: All roads lead everywhere. If I put my mind to it, I will find my path anywhere, and I will find enlightenment wherever I look. There is also the saying: When a flower blooms, the butterfly comes of its own accord."

All these sayings were starting to get on my nerves.

Halkara left for her room, and when Laika came back from announcing Halkara's absence at the factory, we had a family meeting. Sandra must have been in the dirt somewhere, but we couldn't find her.

"Er... Anyone have any thoughts...?"

Shalsha raised her hand. "Halkara was borrowing the words of a great practitioner of asceticism. The way she carries herself is out of respect for and acceptance of the natural state of things, yet also respectful of all the necessary harmonies."

"Right, I think I get what you mean... Not sure how you got all that from posture, but I think you mean calm and gentle."

Unfortunately, that wasn't the information I needed.

"We could do a shock treatment on her by suspending her over a ravine." Flatorte suggested the extreme.

"What a horrible thing for you to say, Flatorte. Simply awful," Laika

admonished her.

“But she’s just pretending to be working toward enlightenment right now. That flimsy mask of hers will peel right off. If we hang her above a ravine, she’ll get scared enough and all this stuff about enlightenment will just go away.”

“Oh... Well, if you put it like that...”

They do say that a person’s true nature comes out when their life is in danger. So it was probably true that she could only keep up the act because she was here with us.

“Falfa would feel bad about hanging Miss Halkara in the air... She hasn’t done anything bad...” The kindhearted Falfa showed some worry.

“You’re right... It’s not like she’s being a terrible person...”

It was the same when Flatorte’s personality changed—some people might think she’s become an even better person. It would be a little strange to bully her into her previous self, too.

“But keeping her like that just creeps me out. She’s practically a different person...”

I understood what Flatorte was saying. I wanted to put her back to normal, too. There had to be a peaceful way to bring the old Halkara back...

Then the door opened, and there was Sandra. She was covered in dirt, so she had probably been in the ground.

“Hey... Can you do something about that box of swamp crystals...? They feel different from people; it’s very eerie...”

A plant had come to file a complaint.

That’s right—we didn’t put the swamp crystals back in the swamp, but instead took a few home with us. The one who’d brought them back (Halkara) had changed so drastically that she was just leaving them alone now.

But Sandra’s question was bringing me back to where this all started.

“That’s it! The swamp crystals!” They must have the key to solving all of this. It all started with them anyway.

And using the crystals meant one thing.

“Let’s feed Halkara the swamp crystals.”

It was worth giving it a shot.

“The swamp crystals absorbed all the dirtied (?) parts of her. So if we feed them to her again, maybe those parts would come back to her...?” I wasn’t sure if it was going to be that simple, but... “And she was the one who wanted to eat them anyway, so now she gets what she wants.”

Sandra wouldn’t like it if we just kept them hanging around in that box.

Everyone nodded. I guess that meant this was a unanimous decision.

Well...Halkara herself wasn’t here, which meant she hadn’t agreed to eat them herself... But I could convince her by telling her she was the one who wanted them.

The impatient Flatorte went to Halkara’s room and came back. “She said she’ll eat ’em. It’s not meat, so it doesn’t go against her precepts or whatever.”

I doubted there was any religion that took much thought to decide whether those weird creatures were okay to eat or not...

But there was one problem.

“Um...how are we supposed to prepare the swamp crystals for consumption?” Laika asked.

“Oh, right...” I couldn’t even picture how we’d cook them. “Why don’t we take a look at the swamp crystals themselves first, then?”

That might give us some ideas. I really hoped so, anyway.

We went outside to where we were keeping the swamp crystals.

We had a huge box out back filled with water.

“The swamp crystals are in here.”

I wished we had a transparent water tank, but we used a box instead. Laika had to make it; we didn’t have one like this, and they weren’t sold anywhere.

“Why’d you put them in water, Mistress?” Flatorte asked.

“It’s like getting the sand out of clams. We had to switch the dirty swamp water for clean water.”

I’d bet that eating it with all that swamp water in there would only make us sick.

Still, I didn’t really feel the need to eat them even after keeping them in clean water, and if the swamp crystals themselves were poisonous, then we’d get sick anyway...

“Shall we look inside, then?” Laika pulled out the plug in the center of the box, and the water came rushing out.

“Don’t let too much of the water get in the soil... This is plant abuse,” Sandra complained, but this was in the back of the house, so I hoped she’d forgive us this once.

Next, Laika took off a corner of the box. I can’t fully emphasize just how user-friendly the box was—not only was she a proper young lady, she was also super handy.

And for the first time in a little while, we got to see the swamp crystals up close and personal.

“They...have gotten quite small.” Laika was shocked—each swamp crystal had shrunk down to the size of a large melon.

“I think they got this small because they haven’t had anything to absorb. That’s just as scary.”

I grabbed a tuft of grass from the ground and stuck it into one of the crystals.

No response.

“Just a guess, but I think now that they’re so small, they don’t have room to absorb anybody.”

I didn’t have any proof of that, but as house representative, I had no choice but to touch it myself. Even if it did try to suck me in, I should be able to resist.

But I was still scared, so I gently poked it with my finger.

Blup-blup, blup-blup.

“It’s like a rubber ball. All right, here I go.” I lifted it with one hand. “Yes! I’m safe! We should be okay!”

“It’s so pretty with the light bouncing off it!”

“It’s like a jewel. It really is a swamp crystal.”

Falfa and Shalsha were delighted; this angle really did show just how sparkly and beautiful the swamp crystals were.

But holding it made me think of something else, and I gently threw the crystal onto the ground.

Boiiing!

With a silly sound, the crystal came back up to my hands.

“It really is like a ball... We could play dodgeball with them...”

After that, Falfa and Shalsha started playing catch.

“Here we go, Shalsha!”

“If Shalsha can stop its movement with my stomach and hold it with my arms, then that will be a good catch.”

Despite her bold claims, Shalsha did not catch the ball.

“You throw too hard, Sis. That’s not how you throw to your little sister.”

“But Falfa doesn’t want to treat you like a little kid. You’re my twin. That’s a bad argument, Shalsha.”

Very insightful, Falfa.

Now we had a toy that had come from an unexpected place. You never know where you’ll find something you never knew you wanted...



As for me, I brought a swamp crystal into the kitchen.

Laika was in an apron, on standby as my assistant.

“Now it’s time to get swamp-crystal cooking. But...how are we supposed to eat it?”

“Let us try cutting it in half, Lady Azusa. It may be only hard on the outside,

like a portion of fruit.”

“Got it. Let’s go with that, then.” I carefully cut it in two with a knife.

Just as Laika said, the inside was softer than the outside, but there was still a lot of resilience to it.

To be honest, it looked a lot like jelly...and suddenly, I wanted to take a bite.

“Halkara said she’d happily eat anything so long as it isn’t meat, but shouldn’t we cook it through anyway?”

“We should... It’s been sitting in clean water, but we should still cook it.” I took out the pot.

“Um... Would it be better to use the pot we don’t typically use...?” Laika didn’t want me to use the same pot we normally cooked in! To be honest, I felt the same.

“Sure. Let me get the other pot...”

I placed thin slices of the swamp crystal into the extra pot and turned on the heat.

As more of the water left the crystal, it turned from a jelly into a firmer, bouncier substance like agar.

How did they make agar again? Wasn’t it from seaweed?

“It certainly looks quite tasty.” Laika also seemed to have high hopes in how it was transforming.

“So you want a taste, then?”

Laika and I exchanged glances.

She vigorously shook her head. “No thank you!”

“Didn’t think so...”

Eating something that people didn’t normally eat required just as much courage as venturing into an unknown dungeon. I’d say it was just as difficult an adventure.

Then I got started cooking for real.

Once the swamp crystal was cooked, I cooled it and diced it up, then put the cubes in a glass cup, drizzled some sweet syrup over them, and heaped fruit on top. I also added some of the sweet bean *anko* I had prepared for the edible slimes.

Halkara wouldn't touch a metal spoon anymore, so I stuck the wooden spoon in it, and— "There, our swamp crystal *anmitsu* is ready!"

"An-meets-oo? I have not heard of it, but it looks good (on the outside)."

"Right? It does look good (on the outside)."

My first impression of it was that it just looked like regular *anmitsu*, a jelly dessert. There was nothing to show that we used swamp crystals as our main ingredient.

I wasn't going to try it, though.

The swamp crystals probably don't taste like anything, right...? It's probably just like agar, right...? So there's no need for me to taste test...

"Right, then we're done. Now, we need to be ready for what happens after she eats it."

Laika gave me a strange look, so I gave her the answer. "I mean, we need medicine for stomachaches..."

We finally called down Halkara—it was time for her to eat the swamp crystals.

"Here, I made this for you, Halkara. Eat up!"

I wasn't lying. I did, in fact, make this for her. The problem was that I didn't know if it was any good or not.

"Oh! I see this will be refreshingly sweet. These square blocks are perfectly clear, like an enlightened heart. This must be good luck."

Likening enlightenment to swamp crystals might be a tad rude to the enlightened.

Halkara's eyes were sparkling, like she was from a shoujo manga from two generations earlier than when I was alive in my past life.

It was better than having eyes glazed over like a dead fish or something, but

the prospect of dealing with Pure Halkara for the foreseeable future was kind of irritating... I think it was similar to those eerie kinds of people who only ever said positive things.

“Go ahead, eat as much as you like. But if you start feeling sick or you think it tastes bad, you stop, okay?”

“My, there is nothing among the blessings of nature that makes one sick! One can even nullify the effects of a poison mushroom with love and courage!”

Now she was talking like a scam artist, but she was not normal right now, so I didn’t bother to correct her.

Halkara took the wooden spoon and scooped up one of the swamp crystal blocks, then readily tossed it into her mouth.

She ate it...

The entire family watched her carefully.

Then she clapped her hands together.

“Delightfully delicious. I pray for your happiness, Miss Azusa, for blessing an ascetic practitioner like myself with such a wonderful dish.”

“O-oh... Okay... Thank you...”

Her reaction told me that the Pure Halkara (aka “weird Halkara”) was still around.

But it wasn’t reasonable to expect immediate results, so it was hard to say yet.

“Though these clear little cubes have no taste, they have taken on the sweetness of the syrup to create a delicate flavor. I believe this would be the perfect way to cool down in a hot summer.”

It sounded like the *anmitsu* was doing its job.

If the swamp crystals turned out to be totally harmless, then I wonder if I could sell them as agar...?

I wasn’t so keen on eating it myself, but maybe I’d bring it up to Beelzebub. I had a feeling the demons would readily take something like this on.

Halkara continued to eat the *anmitsu*, enjoying her dessert.

“Mom, Shalsha wants to try...” Shalsha was succumbing to the delicious temptation.

I was happy to hear that as the person who made it, but I really wasn’t sure if I should feed it to her!

“Shalsha... At least wait until we know it’s not going to affect Halkara negatively, okay...?”

But Halkara finished her *anmitsu* without showing any signs of a stomachache or her personality going back to normal. I couldn’t tell if that was good or bad.

Halkara brought her hands together toward me in thanks. I guess she was a monk now. “Thank you for the meal. Please allow me to recite my own original incantation. It is the least I can do for you.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

If she made it up herself, then it probably didn’t do much.

She seemed okay after eating the swamp crystals. That was nice info to have, but it didn’t put Halkara back to normal.

Maybe all the impurities it absorbed from her left while they were soaking in the clean water? Did we have to feed her swamp crystals that were living in the dirty water?

But suddenly...

“Ahhh! Ghaaa! Hnggaaagh!”

Halkara brought her hand to her chest in pain!

“Halkara! It might be the swamp crystal poison! Go to the bathroom and get it all out!”

“No, Madam Teacher... This is not a physical problem!”

She appeared to be in excruciating pain, but I had a feeling this current Halkara wasn’t going to tell lies. She’d probably say that lying was a horrible sin.

“A demon has entered me! It is trying to lead me astray from the path of asceticism! That is all!”

Sheesh! She was so consistently weird now that I had no idea what I should believe from her!

“Damn! I shall not run along such an easy path! Silence! Leave! Ondabadaba haluant kuaaa! Ondabadaba haluant kuaaa!”

She was reciting another strange incantation! Where on earth did she learn about this stuff?

Then—Halkara’s head drooped, and she stopped moving.

She stopped chanting, and silence fell over the room. She appeared to be staring hard at the table.

Did she get rid of it? Should we be happy she got rid of it?

Halkara slowly raised her head.

Her eyes weren’t sparkling anymore; there was a familiar spaciness to them now. “Wow, I’m so sorry to have worried you all~” She scratched her head. This was the Halkara I knew.

“You’re back, Halkara?! Yes!!” I hugged her. My swamp crystal strategy was a success!

“Oh, stop it, Madam Teacher~ You’re making me blush.”

“Oh, it’s fine. This is special.”

“—Madam Teacher’s love. Yeah, about fifty thousand gold,” Halkara whispered, so I stepped back. This was weird.

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Exactly as I said. This table is 150,000 gold; this glass cup is valuable, so 250,000 gold; and the spoon is 300 gold. I suppose the total value of this house would be 80,000,000 gold.”

She was putting a price to everything!

“Uh, Halkara? Putting a price on everything is kind of indecent.”

Halkara gave me a flat stare. “Complaints are zero gold.”

Her character had changed again!

“The world is money, Madam Teacher! Money is everything! I can’t believe it took me so long to realize something so obvious! Mwee-hee-hee-hee!”

Ugh, what a laugh!

“Boy, I sure have been through a lot, but now I see that there’s nothing in this world as useful and perfect as money. You can’t measure love or whatnot anyway. You’d be a fool to use those feelings as your bottom line. That’s what takes you off the path. We use the concretely measurable money as our yardstick to determine the rules of people’s lives. That’ll make everyone happy!”

She’d gone in the total opposite direction!

“Let us put our faith in money, everyone! Money will not betray us! Money is the only thing that will not betray us! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!” Halkara leaned backward really far as she laughed. It was super creepy!

She leaned back so far to the point I wondered if she’d always been that flexible, until she finally made a bridge.

“Mommy! Miss Halkara’s scaring Falfa!”

And now Falfa was scared! Heck, so was I!

I gently embraced her. “It’s okay, Falfa... Nothing to be afraid of... Well, maybe a little, but she won’t hurt you... Er, I don’t think...?”

I didn’t know if I could handle this Halkara forever, either.

“All right, I’ll start lending out money with high interest!”

“Halkara, get a grip on yourself! Did you have too much of the swamp crystals?”

“Madam Teacher, I *do* have a grip on myself. I am objectively sane because I am using money as my standard for everything. Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Stop laughing like that!”

She had more of a witch laugh than I did.

“That’s right, if I collect enough money, then I’ll gather all the people sunk in unpayable debt and play all sorts of games. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

That was a really evil thing to say!

“A perfect idea. I’ll even put them on a leviathan so they don’t run away, and then I’ll make them play a game where they *might* be able to turn things around and repay all their debts. Only the most foolish people would try it, don’t you think? Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Now she was just dragging the demons into it, too.

“Mommy, are there any poison mushrooms that can calm her down...?”

“We shouldn’t turn to poison mushrooms as a first resort, Falfa.”

But I was still painfully aware that we needed to do something about this situation.

Halkara then stood up and headed into the kitchen. She returned holding knives.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, if she starts swinging those around, we’ll be in serious trouble!

But considering how she balanced them in both hands, it didn’t seem like she was going to use them as weapons.

“What do you think she’s trying to do this time, Lady Azusa?” Laika seemed considerably shaken. I guess people like that were enough to scare a dragon...

“I don’t know... Everything she’s doing is already way beyond anything I would have imagined...”

Halkara was enraptured as she gazed at the knives. “O metal, O metal! It’s all thanks to you that I’ve kept a firm sight on my life. Thank you, thank you...”

“Don’t worship it!”

“I gained so much in life thanks to you. Yes, even others’ hearts...”

“You can’t own other people’s hearts!”

Halkara huffed over her shoulder at me. “Heh.” She was angry. “You can, Madam Teacher. I’ve done it countless times before. Don’t believe me? Go outside and show a grasshopper a coin, then ask it to jump. It’ll do it.”

“Jumping is just what grasshoppers do, though.”

“Big Sis, this is really bad... I think *I’m* getting the chills...” Rosalie withdrew back into the ceiling. Now even a ghost was scared of her. “There’s no evil spirit possessing her at all, but that’s the only explanation for her behavior... How could a normal person become so warped...?”

“So it’s scary for a ghost if there’s no paranormal explanation for something?” I said.

With a cool look, Flatorte dropped a coin onto the floor. She was going right into experiments.

Halkara fell to her knees and gingerly picked up the money. “Ahhh, coin, ahhh, coin...”

“Your personality’s a mess, Halkara! A creepy rich person would never get on their knees for a single coin!” Flatorte argued. Sound logic.

She was right. That was something someone with no money would do...

“No! I want! Every coin! I can possibly get!”

“You’re so stingy!”

So no matter where the swamp crystal’s influence landed, it was always extreme.

“Laika, let’s go to another swamp where swamp crystals live...”

Laika nodded vigorously. “Indeed... We need them to absorb at least some parts of her wickedness...”

“I have no idea if it’ll make things better, but”—I glanced at Halkara before continuing—“I can’t deal with the stress of this.”



Afterward, we fed Halkara to the swamp crystals, then fed the swamp crystals to Halkara over and over, and she was finally back to normal after a couple of days.

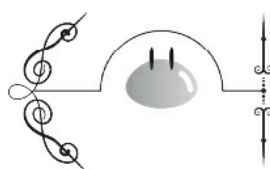
As a result, I perfected the *anmitsu* recipe, but I wasn’t about to feed the swamp crystals to any of the other family, so there wasn’t really any point.

Halkara went around apologizing to the rest of the family. “I am so terribly

sorry for causing you all that trouble... Even I'm shocked and terrified that I said all those things to you..."

"There's a very good reason why people never cooked and ate that creature..."

After watching what happened to her, I learned that nothing is good in extremes.



WE JOINED A POST TOWN RELAY

RACE (DAY ONE)



I woke up a little earlier than usual one morning, so I left the house in the highlands and took a little walk around the area.

“Ahhh~ No matter how long I live, the mornings here will always be so refreshing~”

Since this was the highlands, it was cool in the mornings. On top of that, it wasn’t humid or anything, so I could really clear my head.

As I walked, I saw a couple of figures running toward me—Laika and Flatorte.

From the way they were running, they appeared to be just doing some exercise.

“Good morning, Lady Azusa. Out for a walk?”

“Good morning, Mistress!”

They both called out to me. Both of their faces were nice and red.

“Morning, you two. You must really be eager to be running this early in the morning.”

“Yes, it feels good to exercise at this hour.” Laika, ever the teacher’s pet.

“Getting my body moving helps with stress, so I just kind of follow Laika.”
Doing things without a real reason was on brand for Flatorte...

“Take it easy, then. Well, I don’t think a jog would knock either of you out, though.”

“Yes, we take it in moderation and usually stop at around twenty *gilro*.”

“That *is* far!”

So they’ve run at least twenty gilro...but I guess that’s normal for a dragon.

Then, I heard flapping wings from the sky.

It was a wyvern with a sign around its neck that read NIGHT ROUTE.

Without a doubt, someone was coming to visit me...

When I got back to the house, I found Vania standing in front of the wyvern.

“Oh, good morning. I was sent this way because Her Majesty has something of a proposal for you.”

“You can fly, but you came here on a wyvern.”

“If the trip is too long, then I end up falling. I’ve found myself in some of the strangest places.”

A leviathan falling asleep in the sky could cause a huge disaster, so it was better she didn’t do that.

“So what is it she wants to propose?” Laika asked.

Right as she did, Vania’s stomach growled.

“I’m sorry, I came here overnight, so would you mind if I told you over breakfast? If you have the ingredients, I’ll make it.”

Vania was a great cook, so I’d appreciate it.

“Sure. Go on, then!”

Halkara was supposed to be in charge of food today, but we let Vania take over.

“These seasonings should be enough for a salad dressing~ Here we go!”

The sounds coming from the kitchen were light and jaunty, and all the noises told me a professional was at work.

A breakfast that was three times more luxurious than normal sat on the table. The bowl of salad, too, was arranged to resemble a flower.

“The early bird really does get the worm...,” I commented, remembering an idiom from long ago.

“I only had so many ingredients, so it isn’t anything special. Go ahead and eat up.”

Falfa and Shalsha immediately bit into slices of bread that had been soaked in egg and then fried.

“So soft and fluffy~ It’s like a cake~”

“Superb. Health begins with the body. This is the source of life.”

Vania’s cooking skills were truly the real thing. I almost wanted to take lessons from her, at least once.

And about why she came—

Vania dozed off in her seat.

“You’re just going straight to sleep?!”

“*Yaaawn...* Sorry, I didn’t sleep very well taking the night wyvern here. The wind was in my face the whole time...”

I understood how she felt, but I couldn’t relax until I knew why she was here. Couldn’t she give me a one-or two-word summary before she fell asleep?

“This is a demon affair, so I don’t think you’ll be very familiar with it. I’ll backtrack a bit and start my story there. Very soon, in the demon world, it’ll be the new year in the old-old-old calendar.”

“So just a regular weekday...”

“Every year, on the old-old-old new year, we have a custom we all partake in. It’s called the Post Town Relay Race.”

That reminded me of something from my old life, so I raised my hand.

“What is it, Miss Azusa? I haven’t said anything yet to warrant any commentary.”

“This is all just a guess, but is it that thing where people from different universities race against one another? You run and then pass the baton to the next person on your team?”

From the name and the fact that it was done during the new year, I was imagining Japan’s relay races.

One of the biggest races started on day one in Tokyo, then stopped at Hakone, which was a checkpoint back in the Edo period. Then day two went backward from there, and people raced to be first.

Vania's eyes widened in shock. "Yes, that's it! You know very well! You practically described it!"

I knew I'd be close!

"Runners from universities that made it through the preliminaries wear a thick belt over their shoulders. We start at Vanzeld Castle, pass through towns that were once old post towns, and finish at the Wall of Sorrows checkpoint in the west. This checkpoint is most well-known for the soul-crushing hill there. The return journey is the same route but in reverse."

I always wondered why such similar sports came about...

"Falfa's read about the Post Town Relay Race before~ The demons come out to the edge of the course and cheer on the runners~," Falfa chirped, raising her hand.

"Only a portion of demon universities participate, but Shalsha hears they compete fiercely every year. Shalsha is not a university student, so it doesn't concern me all that much, but it would be nice to see it once."

Shalsha was aware of it, too. They got lots of books from Beelzebub, so they probably knew about the demons' yearly events.

"Yeah. I'd love to watch," I added.

"Oh, I wouldn't have come out all this way if you were invited to just watch. I am Her Majesty's special envoy, you know. Well, I'm pretty sure she chose you because she knows you, and that makes it easy for her to use you..."

What? So if we're not watching, then...

"Her Majesty has asked if you would like to join the Post Town Relay Race as a team."

She was asking us to compete!

But I wasn't the first one to comment on it—although when Shalsha raised her hand, she was pointing out that it was a strange choice.

“Yes, what is it, Shalsha?”

“The only ones who can participate in the Post Town Relay Race are university students. There are no university students in the house in the highlands. Therefore, no one is qualified to participate.”

A very reasonable statement. We shouldn't be joining in on a sport meant for university students.

“Of course, you don't have any qualifications to participate, and all the spots were filled. But all the runners from one single university that passed the qualifying rounds were discovered to all be using illegal substances, so every runner from that university was dropped from the race.”

Too real!

“So at first, they were going to bring up the university with the best score out of the ones that failed the qualifiers, but the university club had already planned their pity trip for that day, so they were unable to join.”

“They'd rather go on their trip than actually participate?!”

I was starting to think people didn't really care about competing in the race...

“So they tapped the second-best university of the ones that failed, but they discovered illegal substance use there, too...”

People would really do anything to win, huh?

“They reached out to the next-best after that, but that was about when they had discovered drug use in one of the universities bumped up to the main event, so it would not be easy for them to select and train runners at such short notice. Even if they were to participate, they still failed the qualifying rounds, so they were unable to produce favorable scores.”

I could understand the situation. I had a feeling the university that prioritized their trip probably had something similar going on. It would be embarrassing to participate in the race and lose spectacularly after having stopped training for a while.

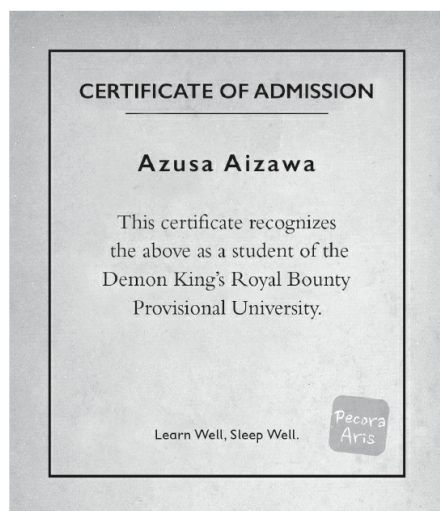
“I get that there's an open spot now, but do they take groups that aren't affiliated with any university at all? It'd probably be even better to just recruit

from a human university at that point.”

I didn’t know a whole lot about relay races, much less about the tone of this relay, but I was pretty sure it was an interesting and exciting event because university students participated.

“It’s not a problem. Please wait a moment.” Vania pulled out several sheets of thick parchment. “This is for you, Miss Azusa. Here.”

This is what it said:



“She made up her own university!”

How much heavy lifting did she have to do? But honestly, if this was allowed, then why bother pretending we were university students at all...?

Vania then produced what looked like a student card. “Here is your student ID.”

“She even made IDs...”

“You can use student discounts as well.”

“I’m not really planning on doing that, though. I’m not exactly keen on that idea...”

Proclaiming that I was a part of a university that I hadn’t even consciously entered, much less studied for or taken exams, was—how should I put this...? Messed up.

But not everyone reacted the same way as me.

“Yaaay! University! Falfa is a college student now!” Falfa raised both of her hands and hopped in place, showing her joy with her whole body.

Oh yeah, she wanted to do some specialized research at a university once.

Human universities were way too far to attend from the house in the highlands. It was a chance to experience campus living, but due to their childlike appearances, they'd opted to stay at home with everyone else.

"Sis, you mustn't get too excited. You may have been admitted, but that is not your goal. It is your starting point. What you decide to do after admission is meaningful."

Shalsha was cautioning Falfa, but she didn't deny the fact that they'd entered university at all, so I guess she was happy about it.

Should I really send them to a boardinghouse so they can attend classes...? No, we'll live together until they ask about it themselves! I want to live with them!

Rosalie was part of the happy crew, too. "I didn't know I could be a college student after death. It's like I skipped a grade or two, huh?"

Definitely not. There was definitely no system in place that let people who died as middle schoolers become university students...

More of us were happy about this than I thought, but the rest of the family seemed disinterested at best.

"I'm already a university graduate. I was a part of the College of Pharmacy at Elf Forest University."

Halkara had already graduated—I didn't know the elves even had college.

"This is the first time I've heard about your higher education, Halkara."

"I cannot say I have very good memories of all the encounters I had with poison mushrooms for my graduate thesis. I don't want to think about it, so I didn't mention it."

Don't tell me she put herself through all that just to get the knowledge she has now about mushrooms...?

"College kids are rowdy every day late into the night, right? Blue dragons do that all the time, even before getting into school. That's why they're nothing to me." Flatorte's image of university students was warped...

I knew there were university students who partied all the time, but...they weren't the kind to participate in relay races...

"Even if you don't choose to participate in the relay, you are still free to use your rights as a university student. You are welcome to enjoy being a student."

"This school doesn't even exist. It's kind of hard to enjoy much about that."

"One thing I want you all to be aware of is that when DKRBPU closes, you will automatically lose these rights."

Don't abbreviate the school name like it's been around forever.

"Now, if you are feeling up to it, we graciously ask you to participate. It'd be a nice sweat to break, no? I guarantee it will be a lifelong memory!"

I feel like the people who genuinely practiced for this race would beat me up if I told them I was doing it for the fun experience.

The very reasonable Laika had the same view. "Um, would it not be rude to those who genuinely trained for the race if we joined?"

Yeah, that's what was bothering me. I wasn't up for inviting any enmity.

"Well...I'd love to say you'll be all right, but I cannot guarantee the others will feel the same way."

An honest and sincere answer!

Vania definitely couldn't declare that it was no problem at all. All she could say was that she didn't know how others would respond. As the messenger who was asking us to participate, I wasn't sure if she should be so wishy-washy, though.

"But we have sent out a notification to all participating universities that this one time will be an exception. And the relay fans know that one group is missing from the bunch, so it should be all right."

It wasn't like any of the other universities were going to lose their spot just because we were participating.

"So who among you will be entering?"

First, I needed to see what the rest of the family thought. This whole plan

would be dead in the water if no one wanted to run.

Laika immediately raised her hand. “I hope to show off what I’ve accomplished with my jogging!”

She had been training, of course.

Flatorte stood up, too. “If Laika is running, then I, the great Flatorte, have no choice but to run as well. I will not lose to her.”

I appreciated the enthusiasm, but this was a relay race. We wouldn’t be competing against each other.

“Yes, let us work hard together.”

Laika took it positively. She was the cool type in gym class. I bet she was popular at her dragon academy...

Those two, at the very least, were eager to enter, and I respected their will to join.

“Then I guess I’ll join in...since it’s just running anyway.”

I wanted to show some appreciation for all the hard work Pecora had done, even inventing a university (but since she used her authority as demon king to do it, maybe it was technically an actual school). And if I ignored the invitation, she would probably pout...

But there was still one other problem.

“I’m not sure how many people you need, but three definitely isn’t enough.”

And even if the whole family participated in the big race in Japan, we still wouldn’t be enough.

“We can manage on that account. Her Majesty will do something about it, regardless. All right, so the three of you. We still have more spaces open, so if you know anyone else who would like to join, then contact me as soon as you can.”

“Okay, got it.”

I could ask Momma Yufufu and the other spirits, plus Godly Godness and Wynona and stuff. Muu and the gang didn’t have bodies (or else the ones they

had were too fragile), so they were out.

“If you don’t find enough, then we will find people to make DKRBPU students and have them join!”

“Seriously, you don’t have to give it an abbreviation.”

“All right, I’ve told you all I need to—*Yaaaaaawn*.” Vania gave a big yawn. “Sorry, would you mind if I borrowed an empty room to sleep in?”

“Sure, sleep all you like...”

Vania slept until after noon, then slowly flapped away in her leviathan form.



Starting that day, Laika and Flatorte began training much more seriously. So healthy and full of life.

I generally kept a loose eye on them. As I hung up the laundry, I watched them run. I was basically the mom in this situation.

That’s right, I haven’t even asked about the rules of the race itself.

I’d given my okay, thinking it would be like any other relay race, but I wondered if that was all it was going to be. I wanted to believe that it was just going to be running and nothing dangerous.

And I was also just curious—how fast was fast here?

Obviously, I hadn’t entered any short-distance runs or marathons in this world. I’d never even heard of such events, either.

I doubted I’d lose any fight against monsters, but I wasn’t sure what kinds of skills I needed in a race of pure running speed. I had no idea.

This Post Town Relay Race was probably the perfect chance to find out.

Afterward, I reached out to all my friendly contacts who could possibly participate. In the end, our whole squad looked something like this:

THE DEMON KING’S ROYAL BOUNTY PROVISIONAL UNIVERSITY

Day 1: Leg 1 Fighsly

Day 1: Leg 2 Momma Yufufu

Day 1: Leg 3 Godly Godness

Day 1: Leg 4 Wynona

Day 1: Leg 5 Laika

Day 2: Leg 1 Flatorte

Day 2: Leg 2 Misjantie

Day 2: Leg 3 Vania

Day 2: Leg 4 Beelzebub

Day 2: Leg 5 Me (Azusa)

Afterward, Vania didn't seem too happy. "Why do I have to run, too...?" I had a feeling that she was being forced into it because she was originally involved, even though she was just a messenger.

On the day of the race, we all gathered under a tent.

All of us had numbers that noted our name, university, and section we had to run. We didn't have a uniform or anything.

Beelzebub poked me. "Come now, you are our representative of sorts. Say something."

I guess I was the one who brought us all together, so I had no choice.

"Uhhh, well, I'm both surprised and glad you all came. I have absolutely no idea how we'll do, but let's have fun doing this."

Immediate applause broke out from someone who was not on our team—Pecora.

"Why are you here, Pecora...?"

"Because I am, on paper at least, the president of the Demon King's Royal Bounty Provisional University."

Well, it would be impressive if someone came up with that name without Pecora's permission.

"I am so terribly excited to see how everyone, including you, Elder Sister, will display their passion for the race! This sport comes with laughter, tears, blood,

explosions, and so much more—”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

She’s not gonna slip that by me!

“Oh, are you surprised to hear about the laughter?”

Technically, but that’s not really what I’m worried about.

“Why are we going to be bleeding? There’s explosions? Is this really that dangerous?”

This wasn’t the kind of relay race I knew! We weren’t supposed to be running through minefields!

“And no one’s told me anything about the rules, even though it’s the day of the race. Isn’t that weird?”

Misjantie looked a little pale in the face, and I’m sure I did, too. That was the sane reaction to all this.

“There is no need to worry. Much. We’ve banned all attacks both unarmed and using handheld weapons for this event.”

“Yeah, this is way different from what I’m familiar with!”

Pretty sure there was no attacking in Japan’s relay races.

“About ten years ago, they banned all use of hands. In the past, many universities placed those who were fast yet had more confidence in their arm strength at the beginning to cause other schools to drop out along the way, but too much of that created quite a dull competition,” Beelzebub explained calmly, although that calmness really made it even scarier.

“If I may repeat myself, it truly is all right. If you and your friends were going to be in any danger, then I would personally advise you to resign,” Pecora said.

I had no choice but to trust her. But I guess I had blood and explosions to look forward to...

“The rules are simple—hand off the team belt to the next person. Additionally, if you fall too far behind the first-place team, you will be given a pity head start. I doubt that will be a problem for this team, but please be

aware of this.”

Finally, we knew what the rules were. But it was hard to say she was taking this very seriously.

“Here is the belt.” Pecora pulled out a belt that was super thick and almost looked like a wrestling champion’s belt.

“Why didn’t you pick something lighter...?”

“Because it’s fun to watch people running through the mountain paths with this wrapped around their shoulders. ♪” Pecora beamed.

I think I wasn’t taking the demons’ relay races seriously enough...

“Oh, I believe our leg-one people need to get ready soon. Best of luck, Fighsly.”

“Thank you! I’ll do my best!” Fighsly marched toward the starting line.

Now that the event was here, I was way more nervous than I thought, but I couldn’t turn back now...

Fighsly aside, all the other day-one runners went to the places where they were to receive the belts.

All of us who were running the route on day two—Flatorte, Misjantie, Vania, Beelzebub, and I—hopped onto a carriage.

It was called the escort carriage, and its purpose was apparently to follow after the teams.

“Using the carriage to ram the runners from behind was banned thirty years ago, so it serves no technical purpose. Relax and enjoy the ride. There are no metal spikes on it.”

“I actually want to know why it was okay *more* than thirty years ago.”

I had a feeling that the violence was due to just how hardy demons were.

“Those from the universities who couldn’t run still wanted to participate, no? They were allowed to drive the escort carriage and run over the enemy teams. There was quite a lot of opportunity for them to do so.”

“Good thing they got rid of that...”

From where the carriage was parked, we could see the first runners. It was still super hard to tell if the demons there were young or if they were older. Especially the more beastlike ones. “Young” college students could still be two hundred or two hundred and fifty years old...

On the outside, there were a whole bunch of people standing around, either to cheer on friends or to watch. Some of them were waving banners, and others looked like substitute runners. From the way they were cheering “You can do it!” I was probably right.

This part wasn’t all that much different from Japan.

“I’ve heard Fighsly has been quite enthusiastic about this. She was even training for the event,” Vania informed me.

We hadn’t done any practice together as a team. We all lived in different places, so it wasn’t easy to get together. I was a little scared because the other universities would probably think our lack of practice meant that we weren’t taking this seriously, and that would annoy anyone.

“And why, exactly, is she so enthused? No one will be winning any money in this. ’Tis a university event, after all.”

That was mean of Beelzebub to say...

“Maybe she has goals outside of money sometimes?”

“Inconceivable. Which is why I find this so strange.”

She had no trust in Fighsly—but a lot of that was Fighsly’s own fault.

Still, we weren’t the only ones cheering her on.

There were demons standing on the roadside holding some slimes.

“Are those Free Tuition 1, 2, 3, and 4?!”

Fighsly had met some wild slimes that took a liking to her, and now she was keeping them as pets. She apparently had no idea what slimes were thinking, but I think they were genuinely attached to her.

The demons holding the slimes were also wearing shirts that read FIGHSLY GYM, so there was no doubt they were here to support her. Must be her students.

“Ah, and despite what one may think, she is still an instructor. I am glad to see her students are here to support her.”

“I’m starting to get really excited.”

Fighsly had really grown. I wanted her to keep working hard for her gym.

It was almost time for the race to start. Fighsly was stretching her legs, wearing a number that read DKRBPU LEG 1.

The tension in the crowd was starting to heighten, too.

A demon staff member yelled, “On your marks!”

All the runners crouched down in their ready positions.

Then came an explosive *bang!* And all the runners took off.

“Huh? You have pistols in this world...?”

“What? ’Tis a small explosive spell for signal use.”

That was similar, too...

Our escort carriage slowly rumbled into motion. The driver was one specialized for this. Instead of a horse, some kind of monster was drawing it—I think it was a behemoth.

“Go, Fighsly! Get ’em!”

“Come on! Let’s go!”

Flatorte and Misjantie were cheering her on. Even though our team had been thrown together in a rush, we were still supporting one another.

The cheers must have reached her, because Fighsly came to the front pretty quickly.

“I wonder if she is hoping to break away right at the start. A bold attempt when she is racing against students who have been training for this,” Vania said curiously.

I had to agree with her. She was an amateur when it came to pure running, so it was hard to imagine that she’d shoot for the moon.

A good majority of the university students were still bunched together,

testing the waters.

“’Tis quite risky to try and claim first so early on. The air resistance at the front means one must expend greater strength. I suppose she decided that she must be at the front, even if it means fighting harder.”

Even though Fighsly wasn’t a professional runner, she *was* a professional fighter. Maybe there was a specific way of tackling this for more competitive types.

We could only see Fighsly’s back from the escort carriage, but I could feel the enthusiasm oozing off her.

She steadily increased her pace and had practically broken away from the crowd.

From the side of the road, I could hear comments of equal admiration and apprehension: “DKRBPU is amazing!” “Can they hold that pace until the end...?”

“They’re right. I hope that early lead doesn’t come back to bite her... Nothing for it but to wait and see.”

I’d think that usually, the team would decide how each runner would run their section together, but DKRBPU didn’t have a supervisor. Thus, no strategy.

We did need a supervisor on paper, though, so Pecora had taken that role.

Fighsly glanced behind her quickly.

She was checking to see if she’d put enough space between her and the rest of the crowd.

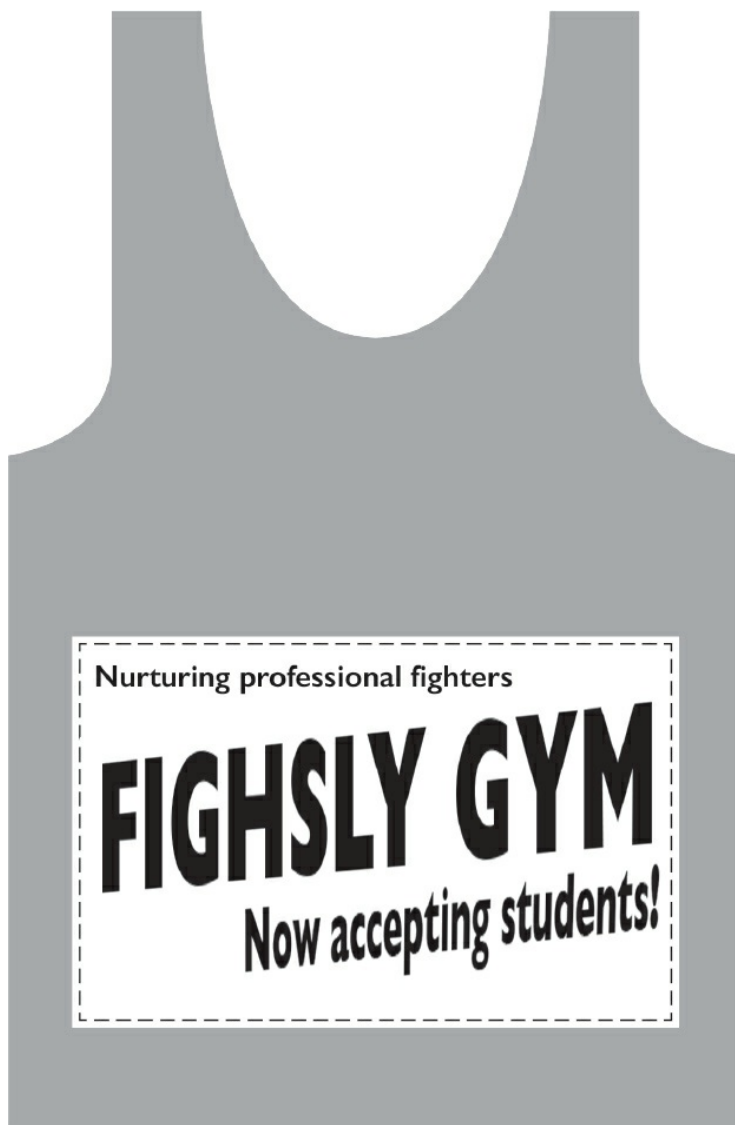
Then I saw her doing something with her hands—was she reaching for her back pocket?

She took out a small, folded something.

What is it? I wondered as she unfolded it. *A new number for her jersey?*

Whatever it was, she placed it on top of her old number. Like I thought, it was a new one. *Wait, what the heck...?*

This is what it read:



“It’s an advertisement!”

She was doing things for the benefit of her company again...

“Being at the front is her advertisement, so that the others may see her well. That was her strategy first and foremost.”

I wished that she’d think first and foremost of winning now that she was a part of the competition.

“Can she do that? Like, according to the rules? We aren’t going to be disqualified or anything, are we?”

Even though our team was thrown together in a rush, I’d still be angry at her for that.

“No need to worry,” Vania said as she flipped through what looked like a rule book. “It’s against the rules to take off your number, but since she’s simply placed something else over it, she’s safe.”

“She knows what she’s doing!”

That seemed even worse.



And I had no doubt in my mind that we were in for another weird adventure.

Fighsly did a full one-eighty and started running backward.

Now we could see her face. Wait, no, that's not a good thing!

"Fighsly Gym! We are Fighsly Gym! Train your body, mind, and wallet at Fighsly Gym! We are currently offering a free week trial!"

"Don't yell ads at people! Concentrate on running!"

I really wished she wouldn't put herself at a disadvantage while she was going so fast.

"Thank you for your encouragement from the escort carriage, Azusa!"

"No! I'm not encouraging you!"

She wasn't listening to me at all!

"Anyone who mentions seeing Fighsly running the relay will get a five-thousand-koinne discount when you join!" she yelled. "Let's sweat together!"

Forget the sweat, face forward, and run!

Now that she was suddenly facing backward, one runner after the other started rushing past her. She'd also burned all her energy on that early start.

"Come on! Run!"

"This is bad! If Fighsly drops out on her turn, then we're done on the first day! It'll be over before I, Flatorte, get my chance to fight!"

Maybe I'd made a big mistake in choosing Fighsly...? I had no idea she'd try to advertise the gym she ran while she was running.

"Oh, 'tis well enough. There is no money in this, after all. Participation is its own reward, et cetera."

"You're right, Lady Beelzebub. We all win when all the race slots are filled."

The bureaucrats from the agricultural ministry were particularly unenthusiastic. Too unenthusiastic, in fact.

"Don't act like people are stupid for taking this seriously."

“Indeed, perhaps I went too far... I spent much of my life lazing around at home on the weekends, so I have no love for sports...”

I really wonder what Beelzebub used to be like?

“Perhaps losing ground there was the proper strategy. Well, I suppose it isn’t, but falling behind due to her advertising should not cause us much damage.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t really understand what Beelzebub was trying to say.

“Look ahead. ’Tis quite the cutthroat competition up top.”

The road was very straight, so we could see the front-runners. Every demon was desperate to get ahead.

Then, a minotaur leaped forward and stuck out his left foot. It caught a lycanthrope runner, who tumbled to the ground!

“What? That wasn’t an accident. He did that on purpose, didn’t he? He stuck it out right in front of that lycanthrope...”

“Of course it was intentional. These things are legal.”

“What...? They are...? It’s not against the rules...?”

“You cannot use your hands, but anyone is free to use their legs. Tripping another is within the legal realm. I’d even say that these tactics are precisely what makes this competition so exciting.”

“Boy, they rarely do it this early~ Oh, Miss Azusa, look! The lycanthrope is angry. They’re kicking the minotaur from behind!”

Things were unfolding exactly as Vania said. A scuffle broke out right before our very eyes...

“They’re really doing everything that isn’t explicitly banned by the rules. What excellent sportsmanship~”

“How the heck is that sportsmanship?!”

While the group at the front tried to get at one another with their feet, Fighsly was now catching up.

I see... So if she falls behind, then she isn’t in danger of getting attacked.

“In Fighsly-style slime fist, one does not attack another if they stand to gain nothing by doing so. That is why I didn’t even hurt a single person in the Post Town Relay! I hope you got a glimpse of my fantastic martial arts spirit!”

“You make it sound like an inspiring story, but you’re basically just saying you’ll beat anyone up to make a quick buck!”

Fighsly ultimately finished tenth out of twenty teams and handed off the belt to our next runner, Momma Yufufu.

“This belt is very heavy, Miss Yufufu!”

“It’s all right. I always make sure to walk for at least thirty minutes a day~”

Momma Yufufu, that’s not what people who enter these races say...

But whatever. The truth was that it was significant enough to participate...

Fighsly was exhausted, of course, so when she climbed into the escort carriage, she leaned back and looked up to the ceiling. “Ahhh, that was rough... I yelled too much for my advertisements...”

“I’m going to ignore that. Anyway, I think it’s pretty amazing that you managed to pass the belt right in the middle of the standings.”

Everyone else was a relay pro, after all. It seemed fighters had their own reserves of strength.

“*Huff, huff...* You may be right. I didn’t want to annoy the team too much by advertising, but I feel better having accomplished my mission.”

“If you were worried, then you shouldn’t have advertised.”

Afterward, Misjantie asked Fighsly for marketing tips.

I guess Misjantie decided she was going to pull something similar during her leg tomorrow... Not sure if she’d get much return from advertising a faith mostly found in the human lands.

Right, time to concentrate on Momma Yufufu. If she reminded me of anyone, it was someone who had just taken up jogging as part of a weight loss program. To put it less kindly, she wasn’t very fast.

And her boobs practically had a mind of their own. They were really getting in

her way...

“Look at all those sweat drops. I guess she is the droplet spirit, huh?”

That’s one thing to focus on, Flatorte.

I had a feeling we were going to fall far behind on Momma Yufufu’s turn...

But instead, she passed one runner who was on the ground, cradling his knee.

“Ahhh, I see that one got a good kick. He’s done in this race. I suppose Misty Mountains Liberal Arts College will not be finishing.”

“There is no honor in this competition...”

“Last year, Dabnen from Torture Hall University took down four people with his kicks and set a new record for the second leg. He should be running again this year, so he will be beating up quite a lot.”

“What happened to beating the clock?!”

I had a feeling that the belt would never make it to me, the last runner on day two...

But it was true that there was a tough fight going on at the front, because Momma Yufufu passed another two fallen runners.

“Oh, I see the front group now. There’s Dabnen from Torture Hall U, Rendazeel from Watchtower University, and Tonteland from Vampire Herb Admiration College, all kicking one another!”

None of those school names made me want to study there...

Again, since the people at the front weren’t really running properly, the back end was starting to catch up. It was starting to look like you could still accomplish a lot in this relay, even if you weren’t particularly fast.

But this brought on a new problem.

“If they keep knocking each other out, Momma Yufufu’s going to be the next target... I hope she’ll be okay...”

I didn’t think this was going to be a very dangerous event, so I hadn’t told her she might be attacked.

“If I make it through this, then I’ll eat three cakes as a treat to myself. One, two, one, two!”

Momma Yufufu was eager to eat...

But the runner Dabnen had realized Momma Yufufu was starting to catch up. He was glancing over his shoulder at her.

“Oh no! He’s going to attack her!”

Dabnen deliberately slowed down to close the gap between him and her. This was bad!

“Oh? Do you need something?” Momma Yufufu tilted her head and asked. “If there’s something you want to say, then you can tell me, okay? ♪” She smiled.

Dabnen muttered, “O-oh, okay...Mom...,” then turned and ran off ahead.

“Oh! Dabnen is blushing! Miss Yufufu’s matronliness made him shy! Do jocks really miss their mothers?! He even called her Mom!”

Vania sounded like an idiot, but she was correct.

Momma Yufufu survived the danger with her Mom Vibes!

“Dabnen does indeed respect sportsmanship. I suppose he was ashamed to strike a woman. Or kick her, rather.”

I could agree, but really, we shouldn’t be attacking anybody.

“Wow, you’re all so fast~ But Momma’s not losing today~”

The other runners seemed somewhat bashful in her presence, too. They stopped attacking one another and concentrated on running.

“Oh, Miss Yufufu has caused them all to start running seriously. The entire race has changed!”

“So they’re not seriously running most of the time...?”

There was something misleading about Vania’s statement.

“The most important thing in the relay race is to practice your foot technique, not so much your running. Training focuses more on building the ability to handle kicks and attempts to trip you.”

If she had known it was going to be like this, then I wished she hadn't come to ask us to take part.

Momma Yufufu ran through the entirety of leg two at her own pace. Personally, I was most glad that she came out of it unscathed.

Momma Yufufu then handed off the belt to our third runner, Godly Godness.

"Here you go, Your Divinity."

"I've got it! I will be sure to give you a virtue stamp card later!"

Is she here to run or to proselytize...?

When she got the belt, we were at eighth place overall. Four teams had dropped out in leg two, so we were down to sixteen. That was a big proportion to have fallen out of the race already.

We took Momma Yufufu aboard the escort carriage and set off again.

"Azusa. Is this goddess any good at running?" Beelzebub asked.

Right, I guess no one else knows much about her.

"Not entirely sure. Actually, she offered to join in the race."

To be precise, she'd appeared to me in a dream and told me she was joining. These gods could suddenly appear in my dreams if they wanted. I didn't have any reason to refuse her, so I agreed.

"Hmm. She is the dark horse here, I would say. I suppose this is the first time a deity has participated in the race since it first began."

"Well, yeah..."

No god or spirit had ever run the big relay race in Japan. Maybe if they went to college, though, they could give it a shot.

Legs one and two together meant they'd run forty kilometers already, so the walls around the castle town were a speck in the distance. Right now, they were running through the fields.

In the fifth leg, it would suddenly change to steep slopes.

Laika was running that part, so I wasn't all that worried. I even had a feeling

that she might set a new record there. The problem was at what ranking she would get the belt.

Now, how was our goddess doing?

Well, basically—she wasn't "doing" at all.

Both her feet were firmly hitting the ground, but she was basically sliding forward! This was not normal running!

"What do you think? Seems a bit like a glitch run, doesn't it?"

"I'm the only one here who understands what that means!"

Beelzebub, sitting with me in the escort carriage, looked extremely uncomfortable. "Hmm, that may be considered against the rules, you know. Flying is not allowed..."

"It isn't? But she's not really in the air, is she...?"

Come on, I'd hate for us to be disqualified now because someone broke the rules. Personally, considering that attacking other runners was allowed, I'd say that practically all the teams were going against the "rules," so I'd be upset if we had to drop out despite that.

The other universities apparently thought the same as Beelzebub, and some went to confirm with the judges. One winged demon staff member flew to our escort carriage to give us the answer.

Crap! If we broke the rules...

"Other universities have been wondering if runner number three from DKRBPU is running in a manner that is against the rules, but we have determined that it is not a problem. She is not flying, nor is she using any flight-related magic. Per regulation, she is not acting against the rules."

Thank that goddess in particular! I really didn't want to lose because of the rules!

"Unique movement like that may be banned from future races, however..."

Yeah, I expected that... There was no way to count that as running...

The winged demon flew off to another escort carriage. For such a hectic race,

the staff sure were taking this seriously.

“Hello, demons! Please have a virtue stamp card! Commit good deeds and collect stamps!”

With her feet sliding along the ground, Godly Godness scattered her cards along the side of the road.

“She’s proselytizing!”

There were way too many runners on this team who joined for their own intentions.

Plus, the way Godly Godness was moving was extremely technical.

The runners in front of her stuck out their legs to trip her, but she would suddenly slide to the side out of the way, like something out of a video game.

“You must not show violence toward a goddess. **Go back five seconds~**” With a smile and a whisper, she suddenly warped the runner backward.

“I can do that to anyone who isn’t a higher being~”

Her powers were too OP for this! Putting someone five seconds backward in time was a huge blow for them.

Someone apparently asked the judges if making someone warp backward was against the rules, but no magic, no foul.

Yeah, having a goddess on the team was the biggest bonus we could ask for... On the other hand, she wasn’t moving at an unbelievable speed, so she managed to hand off the belt at fifth place overall.

There was also a possibility that she had limited her own moving speed and powers. The whole thing would be over if she sent all the runners back to the start anyway.

Leg four was Wynona.

I hadn’t been expecting a yes to my invitation, but she was interested in the demon territories as an adventurer. Now that I thought about it, the normal adventurers never even got the opportunity to set foot in the demon lands. For her, this was her first visit in a little while.

“Here you go, Miss Wynona. The belt.”

“Thank you. Oh... It’s rather heavy...”

Wynona didn’t seem all that physically strong, so I hoped she was going to be okay.

Godly Godness joined us in the escort carriage. She really hadn’t done any running at all; she wasn’t even tired.

“This was my chance to spread my name to the demons, so this was positively perfect.”

“You are a goddess? Oh, look how young you are~ I’m Yufufu, droplet spirit~”

“Ah, so you are the droplet spirit! Yes, I am a goddess. I must say, you are quite young yourself, Miss Yufufu.”

The inside of the carriage was turning into a mom hangout...

“Now, everyone, the view for the fourth leg is very lovely. But you may get splashed.” Vania seemed to know a lot about the race, so she was also acting as our commentator.

“Does that mean we’re going along the side of a lake?”

“That is correct.” Vania nodded. “Leg four follows the path of a narrow sandbar between north Bleach Lake and south Bleach Lake.”

This sandbar business reminded me of something similar in Japan—Amanohashidate. I’d never been, though.

“There is not much room to pass one another on this sandbar, and the escort carriage will only get in the way, so we will take the long way around. This is a critical point in the race, where one may kick runners from other universities into the water.”

“So the regular running isn’t critical?”

This sure was a violent sport.

“Bleach Lake will harm you if you stay in the water for too long, so it is often called the Lake of Death. Falling in here may sap your strength and make it more difficult to complete the route at a higher position.”

“Why do they make them run here...?”

“They also call it the Heartbreaker Lake.”

“So it’s only difficult because it’s dangerous to fall in?!”

I hoped Wynona was going to be okay. All the runners around her would be demons, and rules forbade using any magic.

Our escort carriage went around the outside of the lake.

From here, we could see the runners on the sandbar in the middle of the lake to the left.

Wynona seemed to be struggling physically after all, since many people were passing her, even without falling into the water.

“She’s about tenth place right now. It would be dangerous if she were to get too far separated from the front... I suppose some find the belt heavy...”

Yeah, it wasn’t a baton, but an actual belt. Some people would get tired just holding it.

Then she collided with another runner coming up behind her. *Wait, was she shoved?*

She staggered and slipped off the sandbar and into the lake.

“Wynona!”

I hated that I couldn’t help.

I guess that was it for us. Our team had been put together in a rush, and it was honestly amazing that we managed to get this far to begin with. But not long after, Wynona stepped back onto the sandbar—and she seemed to have more pep in her step.

“Heh-heh, I am bleached white now!” she shouted, loud enough for us to hear her all the way over here.

Indeed, I could see her colorful number was pure white now.

“She bleached herself in the lake!”

“Yes. When you fall into Bleach Lake, all the color is sapped out of anything

you have. Hence the name.”

Was this the reason why Wynona joined? White was her favorite color, after all.

Afterward, she was clearly running faster than before, and her face was practically glowing—she was genuinely enjoying the relay race.

“So she got her motivation when she bleached her number...”

She was going faster and faster, until she eventually rammed into the demon who had pushed her from behind.

And she gave a swift kick, and the demon fell into the lake with a cry.

“Thank you very much for what you did. Just wanted to return the favor.”

Ah, revenge is sweet.

Wynona’s pace accelerated until she was now back at the position where she initially started.

Sheesh, that’s one way to get your motivation...

The Bleach Lake area came to an end, and the escort carriage came up behind Wynona.

“You’re almost there, Wynona!”

“Silence, Stepmother! I know that!” she complained.

Still, I wasn’t going to not cheer her on.

By my estimation, she’d be able to hand off the belt to Laika in leg five at about sixth place. We were probably going to be finishing day one at a good spot.

I could tell Laika was rarin’ to go, even from far away.

“I leave the rest to you, Miss Laika!” Wynona staggered forward, tired from the latter half of her race, and handed the belt to Wynona.

“Thank you! I won’t let you down!”

Laika swung her arms and sped up quite a bit right off the bat.

First, we made sure Wynona was safe and sound in the escort carriage. This

carriage sure could hold a lot of people. I bet that was because a behemoth was pulling it.

“I am thrilled to have experienced Bleach Lake.”

“I knew that’s why you joined. Still, you did a really good job racing inhuman runners.”

“Oh, there you go again, praising me like you are my mother. Stop it.”

She really didn’t need to shoot me down every time I said something nice about her.

But that was when her expression clouded over. “I lost one place. I was hoping to maintain my position when I handed the belt off to Laika.”

So she had been worried about it.

I placed my hand on her head. “It’s okay. It really isn’t enough to hold her back.”

“Why is my stepmother acting so very familiar with me?”

“I didn’t say that as your stepmother, but as your team captain.” The words left my mouth before I really thought about them. *Was* I team captain...?

“At last, we are at the soul-crushing leg five. The incline is steep, and ’tis not uncommon for the race to be decided here. Even I know this, and I have little interest in sports,” Beelzebub said. I guess that made it similar to the Hakone race. Didn’t we just have a soul-crushing lake...?

I also had a feeling there were way more demons clustered along the side of the road here than before.

“In a typical year, the runners of this leg are mountain folk. I see plenty of Cyclopes and ogres here now. Vania, who should we be looking out for today?” Beelzebub asked.

“One in particular is Togula, an ogre from Hell Plateau Karma University and known as the Mountain Destroyer.”

Was anyone graduating alive from these universities...?

As we chatted, Laika surpassed a Cyclops and reached fifth place.

“I...I will...not lose! I shall not lose to anyone but myself!”

“Wow, she’s catching up quite quickly! Escort driver, please go faster! What? The behemoth is tired? Please, if you can!”

We were on a steep incline, so it didn’t sound like the behemoth could speed up. Also, there were a lot more people riding in the carriage now... Even a behemoth would get tired...

“How is the front doing, Vania?” Beelzebub asked.

“One of the drakes has just informed me that Togula from Hell Plateau Karuma University is currently in third place. He’s quite far ahead of her, and I believe he may be able to get first. In second place is Maphrit from Torture Hall University. And in first place is Bowen the Stonebreaker from Basilisk Pharmaceutical College. My, Basilisk Pharmaceutical College has come quite far. Vampire Herb Admiration College fell into the lake in leg four, so they have fallen very far behind. It might not be easy to recover their position.”

I didn’t know anything about these institutions, so I barely parsed any of that!

As the spiraling mountain path got steeper and steeper, the behemoth had almost stopped in place.

“The behemoth is tired. There is nothing we can do. We shall rest for a few minutes,” Beelzebub remarked.

Hrrrm... I really wanted to know how the race was unfolding, but oh well. I didn’t want to abuse any animals.

Just then, one of the runners fell from above.

“Oh, Maphrit from Torture Hall University fell from the bridge! That will be a huge loss of time! And Miss Laika has climbed up a position!”

“This course is merciless!”

The staff brought us a new behemoth, which made a lot more sense than asking any more of the previous one.

“We should be able to go now. Let’s follow them!”

We rushed up the spiraling roads, and thanks to the angle, the runners were

going slow enough for us to pass them.

We still couldn't see Laika. I guess that meant she was about third place?

We kept going, and eventually, we spotted Laika in the distance.

There were cheers coming from the roadside.

"DKRBPU is incredible!"

"Yes, DKRBPU, yes!"

"There's a new mountain destroyer!"

It was hard to tell if Laika was happy with that title, but she was proceeding forward smoothly.

"You got this, Laika! Keep it up! Keep it up!"

Laika slightly raised her right hand. I think that was her way of telling me she heard what I said.

She passed a runner who had BASILISK PHARMACEUTICAL COLLEGE written on their number. There was also a picture of a basilisk on it.

"Oooh! Incredible, incredible! There is only one other ahead of her! And that is Togula of Hell Plateau Karma University!"

"The battle of mountain destroyers, huh?"

That guy must've gotten a big head start, so catching up wouldn't be easy.

But that was when my body lurched forward in the carriage. Misjantie's face collided with the driver's perch.

It kind of felt like we'd come to the highest peak on a roller coaster...

"Oh, I forgot to mention that the home stretch is an incredibly steep downhill road. I have heard it's quite difficult to manage since it requires muscles you don't normally use."

"I wish you'd remembered to mention that!"

This was way more important information than who was running from what college!

"Oh dear... The speed this behemoth accrued earlier means it will not be able

to stop as it goes down...,” Beelzebub said.

So our brakes were broken...and Laika was running right in front of us.

She sensed something was off and turned around.

“Ahhh! You’ll run into me!”

“Sorry! We can’t stop the behemoth!”

Laika sprinted down the hill. She had to—otherwise, we’d crash into her from behind.

“M-Miss Laika is a dragon, right? Perhaps she might be strong enough to hold the behemoth?” Vania brought something up, but that wasn’t the problem here.

“This is a race—if she stops, she’ll lose her place! She has no choice but to keep going! And I don’t think a carriage with this many people in it will be easy for her to handle... We’ve got a lot of momentum...”

This was an unusual situation, so I was sure that Laika’s best option was just to keep going.

“Ha-ha-ha! Go, behemoth! Time to show Laika a world of hurt!”

“Cut it out, Flatorte!”

“Indeed. The rule allowing the carriage to hit enemies was scrapped long ago. Using it to attack an *ally* is unheard of.”

“That’s not the point, Beelzebub!”

Anyway, Laika was running as hard as she could.

The behemoth was massive, so her instincts were probably kicking in, too. She must have felt like she was being chased.

Well, she kind of *was*... I was hoping we didn’t hit her.

Then someone else came into view in the distance.

“That’s Togula, the runner in first place from Hell Plateau Karma University! Incredible! Miss Laika seems to be going fast enough to surpass the mountain destroyer!” Vania cheered in an almost childlike manner.

It was definitely something to be excited about, but our carriage was in danger of running over Laika, too.

“Yes! Then we’ll ram into that ogre! Let’s get ‘em!” Flatorte hooted.

“’Tis against the rules! Violating the rules will not only disqualify you but require you to write three thousand letters of apology!” Beelzebub said.

Flatorte went pale. “...Oh, I don’t want that. That might kill me.”

She definitely didn’t seem to have a strong enough vocabulary to write that many. Maybe she’d have to reach all the way back into her childhood...

“I—I can make it! Because I don’t know what will happen if I make contact with the cart!” Laika sped up even more.

The ogre in first place noticed the commotion going on behind him and glanced back with a hint of panic. I doubted he was expecting anyone to catch up to him with such speed.

Ooh, could Laika actually take first place on this route?

There were only about two hundred meters left.

The ogre in first was running with all his might.

Laika chased him (or really, the carriage was chasing her).

Who was going to win?

“Run [Laika]! Stop [carriage]!”

“Your cheering is rather unclear,” Beelzebub remarked.

“I’m telling the carriage to stop!”

Everyone kept going straight toward the goal. How would it end?!

In the end, the ogre dashed across the finish line. A few seconds later, Laika did the same. She didn’t take first after all.

Everyone from Hell Plateau Karma University gathered around the ogre to praise him. Even though they were the competition, it was still nice to see.

And I guess it’s kind of weird for me to say as a competitor in this race, but I was kind of glad they won. Losing to our makeshift team would really hurt... We

honestly had no plans of even taking second place.

But it was then that we were presented with a different record that wasn't our overall standing.

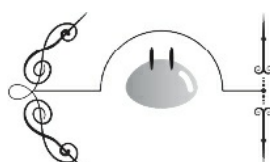
A winged messenger demon immediately came to tell us the news in our carriage.

"DKRBPU, congratulations! Laika, you have set a new record for leg five!"

Oooh! She made a record!

Maybe the carriage chasing her led her to running super fast at the end...? That sounded extremely plausible...

But still, she set a new record! Great work, Laika!



WE JOINED A POST TOWN RELAY

RACE (DAY TWO)



“You did it, Laika! I’m so glad! And you set a new record!” I called.

“Thank you, Lady Azusa!” Laika was beaming with the knowledge of a job well done.

And then we shot past her.

Yeah, we were slowing down, but the behemoth still couldn’t brake completely and let us talk. Once we reached the flat area about three hundred meters ahead, we finally came to a stop.

We met up with Laika and gave her the kudos she deserved.

“Congrats! All that jogging was worth it! Participating in that race was time well spent, I’d say!”

Even if we lost our places tomorrow, it was still more than I could ask for. This called for a hug—she seemed a little embarrassed, but she didn’t refuse.

“Oh, no, I still have so much to work on. I wasn’t able to take first place, after all.”

“It was probably because you started so far back. You set a record—no one’s ever run that leg as fast as you. I won’t fault you for being modest, but you are being way *too* modest.”

“This is all because of your instruction, Lady Azusa.”

That felt a bit like a backhanded compliment (I didn’t give her a second of instruction on the relay race), but it still wasn’t a good thing to be overly humble. Although I’d just told her that.

“Yeah, training’s never really done. Just keep up the good work, okay?” I patted her on the head.

“Yes. I will aim for the top without any self-conceit! And, um...”

Yes?

“Could you pat me on the head more...? It rarely happens, so...”

Oh, she wanted more pats.

“Sure thing, I’ll pat you all you want!”

Now was the perfect time to spoil her with rewards.

But not everyone was happy for her.

“Hmph! Your results are nothing for you to be proud of!” Flatorte approached us with a scowl. “Listen up, Laika. Tomorrow, I, the great Flatorte, am going to get a time even better than yours! I’m gonna set a new record!”

“Uh, Flatorte, Laika was day one, leg five, and you’re day two, leg one, so you’re not going to break Laika’s record, you know... You’d be setting the record for something else...”

I didn’t think Flatorte understood the rules. The routes there and back were opposite, after all.

“What...? Well, whatever. I, Flatorte, will surpass Laika so hard, I’ll get best overall!”

Yeah, she didn’t understand the rules.

But Laika had the upper hand in this situation. “Very well. The least you can do is work to try and match my record if you can. Hee-hee.” She puffed out her chest in a theatrical manner.

Ah, so that was her strategy—she was trying to rile up Flatorte and give us an even better team score.

“Fine, when you see how awesome I am tomorrow, you’ll be sorry!”

Our day would start with a fiery Flatorte tomorrow, so...there was a real possibility that DKRBPU would end up in first place. It was honestly fantastic that we got second place on the first day.

But after Flatorte, the belt would go to Misjantie, Vania, Beelzebub, then me—were any of us super fast?

Was I fast? I knew I had better speed stats than the average human, but could I beat athlete-level demons?

This was the reason why I wished I had less of an important position in the race... If I got the belt at second or third place only to have other people start rushing past me, that would be really embarrassing...

All the other university runners from third place and later dashed across the finish line, and thus, the first day of the race came to an end.

Some runners came in injured. Maybe this race was a little too hard.

As I turned to leave, Vania grabbed my arm and pulled. “Please wait a second,” she said; apparently, there was some more entertainment on the way.

Just as she did that, Kuku the almiraj stepped onto the stage.

She had her lute draped over her shoulder—Ah, so she was going to play and sing.

“Miss Kuku will be singing the theme song for this year’s event.”

Oh yeah, she did mention she was going to be singing the theme song for some kind of big competition...

“She really made it, huh? She’s so popular,” I mused.

There was some sort of magic that acted as a microphone, and her voice reached everyone.

“Well done on your first day, runners. I’m Kuku the minstrel. Maybe it’s a cliché, but it’s been so inspiring seeing you all work so hard. I’m delighted to have been given the chance to write the theme song for this race.”

I guess every world had theme songs for competitions like these.

“This is ‘Life of a Substitute.’”

Life of a Substitute

Words & Music: Kuku

The runners' sweat glistens in the winter sun
The audience along the road waves school flags
I wear my school uniform,
yelling my voice dry I squeeze my way through the crowd

This is the life of a sub, life of a sub

I'll never be top-level, just among the masses
This is the life of a sub, life of a sub

I'll never be famous, never be a loser, always on the sidelines
(subsequent verses omitted)

What a weird theme song!

"I believe they chose the wrong person... She cannot write happy songs at all."

Beelzebub was astonished. This was bad, even for demons.

When the first song was over, the crowd had cooled down nicely. I'd think she wouldn't understand what was going on if she riled everyone up.

"Thank you for listening. That is my first song over. My next song is called 'What Comes After Doping.'"

I could tell already by the song title that it was not going to be good! *Ah, this is gonna be dark! I don't want to hear this!*

"Hmm? Oh, we're out of time? Oh, I see..."

The staff had sensed the impending disaster, so the second song was canceled.

I had a feeling Kuku was going to struggle in the future if she didn't expand her art style.

Next, Pecora came to stand on the stage.

"Thus concludes the first day of the Post Town Relay Race; well done, everyone~ ♪ We've had a bit of a scandal again this year, and I was a bit worried what might happen to the event, but I am glad we were able to hold it without incident~ ♪"

So Pecora starts off mentioning scandal, too...

“I honestly had not imagined that My Own Royal Bounty Provisional University would reach second place. I simply cannot keep my eyes off them, either. Of course, I am rooting for them.”

Was the demon king allowed to declare which team she was supporting...? And I noticed that she modified the university’s name whenever she used it.

“Whether today ends in joy or tears, tomorrow is the last day. Give everything you want to do an explosive finish. Well, I don’t want to keep you for long, so I shall end it there. ♪”

I could say we were all thankful that the demon king could read the room.

“Also, Elder Sister, please come see me after this.”

She called me up!

I couldn’t not go, so I made my way over to her.

Pecora was in a warmed tent—very royal. Inside, she sat at a table and was drinking tea.

“What do you want? I have a meeting for tomorrow right now.” I was the anchor for tomorrow, so I had a big responsibility.

“What do I want? I want to see my elder sister.”

She was very straightforward when it came to this stuff.

“However, I have instructions for you as your younger sister,” she said as she elegantly sipped her tea.

“Instructions from you are never a good sign... I’m not sure if I want to hear this.”

“But I am technically the president of DKRBPU.”

That was when I realized something.

“I knew it! We’re just puppets dancing in your hands again...”

“No. If you were worried, I must let you know that I am not planning any tricks. I am being perfectly sincere about this. To put it bluntly—”

Pecora stood and poked me in the stomach.

“—You must nurture your friendship with Miss Beelzebub.”

“Uh, what?” I genuinely didn’t understand what she meant.

“Is that all you have to say? You two have a long history together now, no? A wonderful relationship indeed. But I believe recently, you have been taking her for granted. Are you sure you are not resting on your laurels simply because you have known each other for so long?”

For some reason, Pecora was criticizing me.

I hadn’t done anything to warrant this.

What was so bad about resting assured in our relationship, just because we’d known each other a long time now?

“I still don’t understand what you want to say.”

“You and Miss Beelzebub have not gone through anything significant together. Well, I suppose strictly speaking, what was supposed to be an ordeal turned out to be an easy hurdle since you both are so powerful. It hardly felt like an accomplishment. I am certain you understand what I’m trying to say now, yes?”

Uh, not really, no...

“You must both push your limits together! You are the last runner, Elder Sister, and Miss Beelzebub is the runner before you! You must create great results with the power of your friendship!”

Did she seriously just cite the “power of friendship”?

“Friendship... Friendship? With Beelzebub? I know we’re friends, but...*friendship*...” I think anyone would falter if someone told this to them.

If anyone came up to me and started spouting something about our bonds of friendship, that would really freak me out. I didn’t want bonds of friendship. It’s like someone you haven’t spoken to since graduation suddenly messaging you and trying to sell you stuff.

“Aww, see~? You’re so unsentimental about this; you two are so laid-back

since you got to know each other after growing up into adults. No one will see you as old school friends.”

“But...we’re not...”



And the story was contradicting itself now, wasn't it? Were we supposed to be DKRBPU students right now, or old friends from college? Or did she mean high school?

"No! You must be more emotional with each other!"

"You sure are passionate today, Pecora..."

"Indeed. I recently reread this book and learned exactly what passion is."

Pecora picked up the book lying on the table and showed it to me.

Our Pandemonium! Part 1

The cover showed two college-girl demons running hand in hand through a dungeon.

"So it's the book's fault!"

"Aww, it doesn't matter~ All sorts of things influence you in life~ Sometimes it's people, sometimes it's books~" Pecora pouted. She had a point; it was a little strange to cheapen the influence books could have over us.

"Fine. I'll give you that one."

"Thank you! And tomorrow, please foster your friendship with Beelzebub! You just promised me!"

Huh? I think she's putting words in my mouth...

"Wait, wait! I didn't agree to the friendship part!"

But she was already gung ho about making me do this. This tricky little demon had weaseled me into this, and now I couldn't back out.

"I understand how embarrassing it must be! But friendship is precious! And it is completely separate from our sisterly relationship, so I have nothing to complain about with regard to it! Instead, I am happy to support you! Please do not worry about it!"

"I'm not worried at all!"

"Now, Elder Sister, I am looking forward to a beautiful display of friendship tomorrow. That is all the direction I have for you as your president!"

“Are you a president or my younger sister?!”

“Details, details. Anyone can enter university at any age, and anyone can establish a university at any age. So it is entirely possible for an elder sister to become an athlete and the younger sister to be the president.”

“Your logic is all over the place!”

“We are not accepting feedback at this time! The president is leaving now! Do your best tomorrow~”

When Pecora was done, she left the tent and flew away...



But what Pecora said stuck with me—not the part about Beelzebub, but the rest of it.

We had our dinner at the inn where all the other students were staying, and I was thinking the entire time. She was right—ever since I realized I’d maxed out my level, I hadn’t really done anything that seriously challenged me.

I didn’t think it was right to tackle everything at maximum effort. I honestly thought it was best to take everyday life at a leisurely pace. If I was working at 100 percent the whole time, then I would be going over my limits of what I could actually handle. You can only really put your all into something if you’re not doing it all the time.

Therefore, it wasn’t a terrible thing to give 100 percent in pursuit of a goal. It was much better to have those experiences instead of not. And it wasn’t a bad idea to tackle those things with someone else.

Well, both Beelzebub and I knew exactly what we were capable of, and if our place in the race plummeted, then it depended entirely on factors beyond ourselves. We couldn’t control everything.

“Mm, do I have something on my face?” Beelzebub realized I was staring at her.

“No, nothing. I was just thinking how you’re going to be handing off the belt to me tomorrow.”

“Indeed I am. ’Tis nothing to get worked up over. We are essentially

entertainment. I would be more than satisfied to hand off the belt to you in the middle of the pack.”

Beelzebub didn’t have much motivation to win to begin with...

“Victory does not have any substantial financial benefit, and this entire cobbled-together university has no good name to uphold. There is nothing to gain from this event.”

“I think you’re overstating it.”

I disagreed—and I hadn’t realized at first that I did.

“Mm... Was what I said that peculiar?”

“I think you’re right in that this team was put together purely for entertainment. But everyone took the race seriously today—”

“Even Fighsly? She was advertising her business. So was that goddess.”

Godly Godness scratched her head with a sheepish giggle.

Hey, I was trying to be serious—don’t pull the rug out from under me!

“S-sure, there were exceptions, but we finished today at second place, and that’s really good. At this point, we should aim for the total win!”

But Misjantie and Vania, two of our runners for tomorrow, seemed worried.

If I counted Beelzebub, then that meant most of us had no honest intention of winning!

I think I’d pushed it too far. I got excited because of Pecora’s pep talk, but this wasn’t like me at all...

Beelzebub gave a deep sigh.

I had a feeling I was the odd one out here.

“Very well,” Beelzebub said, to my surprise. “I understand. I shall do what I can. I have no intentions of betraying your feelings. I shall play along with you.”

Oh, she accepted my suggestion.

Pecora had told me to foster our friendship, but Beelzebub and I were still friends right now.

“Thank you, Beelzebub!”

“But still, do not come crying to me if we do not secure ourselves a good position in the race, hmm? Our second-place result on day one was simply too good to be true. None of us are professional runners. ’Twould be more likely than not that we will be left in the dust.”

“Yeah, and that’s when we give it our all.”

“Satisfied, then? Hell’s bells, I suspect our first-place prize would include a letter of complaint from the race committee...”

“Oh, that’s true...”

It’d be like a team of comedians winning Japan’s version of this event.

“Well, if they do, perhaps I will simply complain that the rest of them are too slow.” Beelzebub scratched her head.

We were of the same mind now. All I had to do next was do my best.

I wasn’t entirely convinced we’d be able to secure the top spot, either, but not putting our all into the competition would be a disservice to the other universities—not to mention Laika and her day-one record.



The next morning, all of us day-two runners hopped onto an escort carriage first thing in the morning and went down the mountain.

We dropped off people one at a time at the places where they’d be handing off the belt.

I got off at the last leg, which was near the town around the castle. I was also handed a small box.

I wondered what it was at first, but it turned out to be a magic streaming device.

“Here are our runners, waiting to set off on leg one. Everyone seems to be brimming with energy.”

I could hear the commentator’s voice—it was practically a TV!

“The competition between first and second place is fierce. The runner from

Hell Plateau Karma University will start, and the runner from the Demon King's Royal Bounty Provisional University will start five seconds afterward."

The rules there were exactly the same as Japan's big race... The teams that all came after the first-place team don't go until that time difference had passed, so a team that crossed the finish line two minutes after the first team would start their race two minutes after the first team.

Still, I really appreciated this TV (I'm just going to call it a TV now). Just waiting with no news for Beelzebub to show up would have been torture. I would've been so jealous.

I could see Flatorte on the screen—she looked motivated, hopping in place to warm up.

I hoped she didn't get *too* excited and ended up flying... That would disqualify us. I'd have to make Flatorte write some letters of apology for that.

I had absolutely no idea if we'd get a chance to satisfy Pecora, but I'd do what I could.

The first-place runner on the screen set off running, and a few seconds later, Flatorte took off.

She was going at top speed right off the bat.

"I knew this would happen! She's not pacing herself at all!"

She was running as hard as she could. Her leg was about twenty kilometers—was she going to have enough energy to finish...?

"My, my! First and second places have swapped on the first uphill climb, before we even start going downhill! Flatorte is running like the demon king is after her!"

The commentary was calling her desperate. She *was* going fast enough for a sprint, after all...

Not long afterward, Flatorte reached the long downhill route.

When she did, I got a flashback to yesterday.

"Gaaah! I can't stop! I can't stop at all!"

Uh-oh, Flatorte was yelling...

That's because you're sprinting downhill!

But she wasn't exhausted at all; instead, she only got faster.

"I was gonna stop at a flat spot, but it's all downhill!"

She wasn't paying attention to the course at all... All she had in her noggin was get-up-and-go...

"Oh dear! DKRBPU's Flatorte has greatly increased her speed as she rushes downhill! The gap between first and second grows ever wider!"

The commentator was surprised, too.

I could comfortably call this her full speed. I wasn't sure she'd be able to stop at all...

"However, the course ahead becomes a narrow, cliffside road. Can she handle the curves at this speed?"

Good question. I could see the road was getting narrower. I just hoped she didn't go tumbling off the cliffside...

Flatorte was the only one in the shot now. She'd put considerable distance between her and the person behind her.

Then came a sharp turn in the road—

"I can't turn!"

—and she missed it entirely, sailing right off the edge.

"She fell!" My head settled in my hands.

Guess this means we're out of the race... The commentator, too, was talking about how it was all over for us.

"Oh, hold on a minute. Flatorte has not left the race!"

I looked back at the TV and saw Flatorte running along the course, totally fine.

"That cliff was nothin'!"

"Flatorte is running on the path at the bottom of the cliff! That was quite the drop, yet she seems okay! Has she just found a major shortcut? We've just

received word from the staff. She did not fly, so this is acceptable according to the rules. They have allowed her shortcut!”

What the hell, Flatorte...?

Due to the huge gap Flatorte had put between her and everyone else, I couldn't even see the escort car behind her anymore.

Flatorte eventually reached the plains and handed the belt off to Misjantie for leg two of day two.

“Take it!”

“First place? Seriously, man...? Way to pile on the pressure...”

The camera stayed on Flatorte for a while after she finished running. The commentator was saying something about a new record for that leg. They told Flatorte about this, too. There was an interviewer saying something or other about it.

“A new record? Yes! I, the great Flatorte, am the winner!”

Flatorte was radiating pure joy, and she looked ready to go another round. She still had strength... Laika was a heck of a dragon, but Flatorte might have her beat in raw power.

“It was a way better time than Laika, right? No, I don't care if our legs are technically 'different,' just tell me who had the better time!”

All she was thinking about was competing with Laika's time...

The interviewer asked if she had planned for this to happen.

“Plans? Plans are too much for blue dragons. You can make all the plans you want, but you still don't know if it's gonna work until the time comes. So why bother making them?”

That sure was Flatorte for you...

The interviewer then asked how she felt about her big first-place upset.

“I saw someone running ahead of me, so I concentrated on passing them. That's it. But they weren't really running that fast. It was like they were trying to save energy.”

Well, yeah, that's what runners normally do...

"Anyone who isn't giving their all is an idiot. That's why I, the great Flatorte, took first place!"

An idiot, huh?

I had a feeling constantly running at top speed and constantly putting in 100 percent effort were a little different, but what she said stuck with me.

"I guess I'll look silly if I don't run as fast as I can, huh?"

The TV switched to Misjantie, the pine spirit.

Since Flatorte put in a huge gap between first and second place, Misjantie was simply running quietly by herself.

But something looked off about her number.

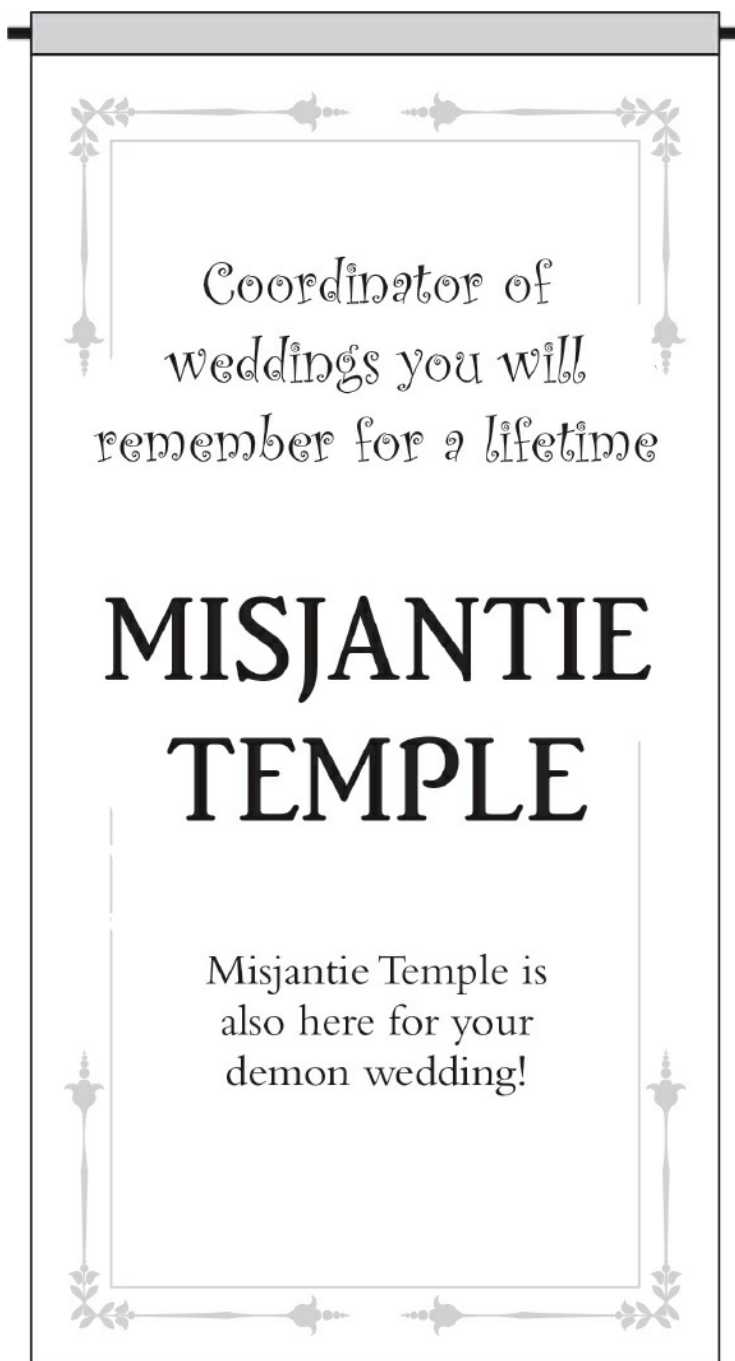


So she did add an advertisement to it... I guess it was small enough to be allowed.

She was waving a lot to the crowd on the sidelines. What a show-off. It wasn't like she was a very fast runner to begin with, so I didn't think she could maintain the lead that Flatorte had created for her.

But by the time she reached Bleach Lake, I noticed something else was strange.

There were a lot of pine trees by the water, and every single one had some cloth hanging off it.



"She's using the pines!"

"Well, it seems the same wedding advertisement has been put up on all the pine trees. After seeing so many ads, I suppose someone would want to use these services, but...I don't know."

The commentator was speaking his mind. I knew how he felt.

The advertisements continued all the way to the narrow sandbar, where they took a quick pause.

And just as Misjantie reached the end of the sandbar, Hell Plateau Karma University in second place and Basilisk Pharmaceutical College in third place were creeping up closer to her.

I knew that once they got out of the sandbar and the path was wider, they were both going to shoot right past her.

Both second and third place came up to challenge her.

Well, Misjantie did her best, but I guess this was it for her.

But then something strange happened.

Trees fell before the second-and third-place runners, blocking the path—pine trees, specifically! And they were all behind Misjantie, so she was unaffected.

“She’s totally using her spirit powers!”

With their paths blocked by the fallen trees, the second-and third-place runners were waffling between climbing straight over them or going around. Crafty.

The escort carriage came into the shot. I could even hear Laika say, *“Miss Misjantie, please run properly!”*

“Is this against the rules? I’m not entirely sure...”

The commentator was bewildered, too... Once again, DKRBPU was in danger of being disqualified. We were honestly an awful team in many ways, since we’d had the judges called on us so much already.

“Ummm... There is no article in the rules forbidding the use of spirit power, so it is not a problem. This is certainly causing a big headache for all the runners behind her.”

Phew... Glad we didn’t end up losing because we broke the rules.

Yet, even despite the setback, the second-and third-place runners still sped past Misjantie.

To be honest, I was kind of hoping they would. What Misjantie did was basically illegal anyway.

Even though we had now dropped back to third place, it wasn't as though Misjantie had set us all back too horribly, and she still handed the belt off to Vania.

The interviewer once again came to ask Misjantie some questions.

"Boy, what a wild coincidence, man, those pines falling down behind me. Those tree roots can't really hold in the sand, y'know, so that's probably what happened. It's not against the rules. I totally didn't break the rules, man; I dunno why you're still asking me. Look, man, if I did anything wrong, we'd be disqualified. But we're still in the race, so water under the bridge, right? Hey, could you stop pointing that thing at my face? I didn't consent to this, man!"

I don't think I've ever seen an athlete who asked not to be filmed.

Our leg-three runner, Vania, was doing her best to chase after places one and two, but they were slowly getting farther away from her. I knew they'd have an advantage over a regular person (well, leviathan, I guess) as pros.

Also, now in the second half of day two, there was a huge gap between the top and bottom teams.

The camera switched to show the relay spot.

The runners from the teams that were lagging behind were panicking because their belts still hadn't come yet.

"Oh dear, Crionlé from Endless Desert College still hasn't come to the relay spot. If he is unable to pass on the belt, then the next runner will start without him!"

I guess they had some mercy if they couldn't pass on the baton—er, the belt.

I wasn't totally sure on the rules, but it sounded like if there was too much time between runners, then the next person could go without the previous person having to hand it off.

"Crionlé from Endless Desert College is just finishing his leg. Will he make it? He seems to be in pain. Will he be able to hand off the belt? Five seconds left! He

might just miss that window! Three, two, one, out!"

At that moment, the next runner from that school set off without the belt.

Then, at the same time, something by Crionlé *exploded*.

I blinked and peered at the screen. The demon was collapsed on the ground, his face burnt.

"Now, all our fans will already know this, but when a runner is unable to make the handoff, the explosive spell in the belt detonates. The belt is how they prove they've seeded in the race, which means no seed for next year. What a devastating rule that is for them."

That was seriously harsh! They were merciless!

"But that's how it is, and we've all accepted it, organization and fans alike. Some of us, deep down, are simply dying to see runners crumble into tears when they can't hand off the belt. All of us demons have some cruelty inside us, and we won't run away from that fact. And our first sacrifice today was Endless Desert College!"

The demon world sure was terrifying...

"But he was just a hair's breadth away from making it. Truly close. If those pine trees hadn't fallen and required him to take a detour, then I'm sure he would have managed to hand it off. What an unlucky break."

Misjantie's influence was reaching far!

"Oh, we have contact from leg two. Apparently, the fallen pines are now standing again. There is still much we have to learn about the natural world, I see."

Oh, so the pines weren't dead after all. I guess the pine spirit wouldn't kill her own trees. Still, did she really have to block the path like that...?

And now the camera returned to the front of the race.

In first place was Hell Plateau Karma University, and in second was Basilisk Pharmaceutical College. Vania was still in third, but she was having a tough time.

Once again, another runner passed her.

Laika and Momma Yufufu were cheering for her from the escort carriage, but Vania was definitely in pain.

“You can do better than this, Vania! Come on!”

I heard a familiar voice from the sidelines and spotted Fatla, waving a flag with Vania’s name on it.

“The fight has only just begun! You can do this! Take your spot back!” Fatla was really yelling loud for her little sister.

“You’ve got this, Vania! Almost there!” I yelled at the screen, not that she could hear me.

Vania smacked her own legs and then rushed forward.

She came up close behind the runner who’d just passed her—and he stuck out his leg.

Oh, right. It was totally legal to trip others.

But leviathans were powerful members of the demon world. She gave him a good roundhouse kick, and the runner now formerly in third place sailed through the air.

Vania’s face said, *How’d you like that?* and this time, she flexed her arms. Definitely gloating.

“CTU’s third-place runner has fallen! Vania from DKRBPU has taken third again!”

“Yes! Good kick!”

That rule was starting to corrupt me.

Being able to attack someone must have lifted her spirits, because she started running at a brisk pace. Your mentality was hugely important in sports.

Still in third place, Vania handed off the belt to Beelzebub.

“The belt is heavy...”

“Third, hmm? Not bad... I suppose I shall run as I did long ago...” Beelzebub

took off running in leg four. If she could close the gap just a bit, then we could probably come back and take first place.

Beelzebub was running with purpose. She wasn't relaxed and treating this like work. I could tell she was trying to get the belt to me, the anchor, as soon as possible.

That's right—we had to give it our all, since we decided to participate. Otherwise, weren't we wasting our time here?

I could also clearly hear Laika and Flatorte shouting from the escort carriage.

"They are not far enough ahead for you to give up! Aim for first!"

"You can still get past them! Show 'em what a minister can do!"

"I know, I know! I shall do what I can! This will be the most serious run I have taken in centuries!"

But the video switched to the fight between first and second place. All in all, that was way more important. They only showed Beelzebub right after she started running.

Both the first-and second-place runners in leg four were demons who had antlers like deer, long legs, and some real speed. They were neck and neck—with a little effort from second place, they would easily switch.

What happened next, then, wasn't particularly surprising.

The second-place runner from Basilisk Pharmaceutical College dashed toward the first-place runner from Hell Plateau Karma University and tried to trip him from behind. I guess that was his bid for first.

It was enough to make the runner from Hell Plateau Karma University stumble, but not enough to send him sprawling to the ground.

So he fell right on top of the other runner!

This was the "if I can't run, then neither can you" approach.

Leg technique was being fought with leg technique, resulting in a stalemate.

"The Tyrant of Leg Four and the Hyena of Leg Four have clashed! What a match we have today!"

The heck are those nicknames...?

But this fight between first and second place worked to the advantage of the third-place runner, Beelzebub.

I could faintly see Beelzebub's face approaching the battling duo from behind on the screen.

"You've got this! Go, go!" I yelled.

First and second place both realized that Beelzebub had caught up to them, so they took off again. Of course, if they stayed locked like that forever, someone would get ahead of them eventually.

Regardless, Beelzebub didn't keep her distance. She was settling into a rhythm and slowly gaining ground.

With sweat dripping off her, she vigorously pumped her arms.

I honestly knew such a high-ranking demon would give these guys a run for their money. But there was nothing elegant about how she ran that told me she was high-ranking... There was a stubbornness to her...something like self-made tenacity.

"I am putting my all into this, Azusa, so I will accept nothing less than your absolute best! If even one runner passes you, you shan't hear the end of it from me!" Beelzebub yelled.

She wasn't close enough for me to hear at all, but it almost felt like she was right there talking to me.

Of course I was going to run. I hated being forced to work, but it was my decision to run, so I could wear myself out once in a while. Well... Maybe that was going overboard for me, so I'd just do what I could within the realm of my limits.

Then, a certain voice came through the screen.

"You can do it, Miss Beelzebub~"

Hmm? That voice...

"Glory and victory are right before your eyes."

“Animals are so good at running. Do your best.”

Those were Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra’s voices! I’d never mistake them.

But they aren’t along the side of the road—where are they?

They were in the sky.

The three of them were riding a wyvern and cheering Beelzebub on.

Fatla was also riding on the same wyvern, so this was probably her idea. I hadn’t heard anything about this beforehand, so this was a surprise to me.

Which meant it would be the same for Beelzebub.

“You have given me strength! Nothing scares me anymore!”

A bright smile crossed her face, and her legs were pounding the road harder than ever.

She clearly got a lot of motivation from that... She knows how to get what she wants...

“I must run for my daughters!”

“They’re not yours!!”

Beelzebub slowly approached first and second place’s tight race.

They both glanced back at her and accelerated.

This was going to be much closer than I thought.

“Hey! I want to show off, so get out of the way! I do not know what burdens you are running with, but I am certain you are not running for your daughters! Your motivation is no match for miiiine!”

I said stop calling them yours!

Still, this was a heck of a run. She was right behind them; they couldn’t outrun her.

I know some cheers can only add to pressure, but those cheers purely gave her a burst of energy.

At long last, the leg-four runners came into view.

Hell Plateau Karma University was still in first place. Right behind them in second was Basilisk Pharmaceutical College. And a little behind them in third was Beelzebub. The distance between her and the rest was a lot shorter than when she first started running.

We could get first. It all depended on how I ran.

In a way, this run was saddling me with an unbelievably huge responsibility.

“Here, here! I did what I could! It is time you lived up to your claims of yesterday, Azusa!”

“I know! I don’t really have a choice after seeing you run like that!”

I took the belt from her and hoisted it over my shoulder.

“Whoa... This is really heavy...” It was like a wrestler’s champion belt.

“No whining—run! Run to the goal in Vanzeld!”

I’d go as fast as I could without completely draining my batteries.

The belt was heavy, but I felt light. That was probably more because my body was still seventeen years old rather than due to my level being high. And I led a very healthy lifestyle.

It was too early for any attacks. I would just keep going forward while keeping an eye on first and second place.

I could also hear the escort carriage following behind me.

“A good pace, Lady Azusa! I doubt they will leave you behind!” Laika’s voice sure carried well.

“That is a good pace to keep until halfway! I believe you will be able to take second simply like that!”

Like she said, I could see the gap between first and second getting wider, although it was less that first had broken away and more that second was falling behind.

The silhouette of Basilisk Pharmaceutical College’s second-place runner was growing. A silhouette that seemed to be carrying some kind of spiked shell on his back.

Wouldn't a shelled back make it more difficult to run...? Well, at least that made my job easier. It was time to go in for the attack.

The runner also seemed to know he couldn't keep up the pace and started glancing back at me.

He was planning on kicking or tripping me. I was starting to understand some of these tactics now that we were on the last leg of the last day, much as I didn't want to.

Problem was, I didn't know how to dodge. If he really did kick his foot out at me, would I be able to avoid it?

The spiky back of second place was getting closer. He was slowing down intentionally. If I moved to the side, so did he.

Then the second-place runner stuck out his leg at just the wrong moment for me to jump out of the way.

So my own foot stayed on track and ended up kicking him straight in the thigh.

There was a dull *thunk*, and the second-place runner tumbled forward...

I could hear "Nice kick, DKRBPU!" from the side of the road.

"It's because my attack is so high..." Well, it was his own fault; I didn't even try to kick him.

"Yes, Mistress! Crush them!"

Flatorte was cheering for me from the escort carriage. *Crush* really was an apt word for this whole race...

But it wasn't a huge loss for them, so it was fine. I could even say that one of my rivals was down now.

Right, one more.

The runner from Hell Plateau Karma University was a cat-eared beast-person. His tail was whipping all over.

I upped my pace a bit.

I decided I was going to get ready to snipe first in a final sprint right at the

end. And if that sapped me of all my energy, then I'd deal with it later.

I had a feeling the cheers coming from the sides of the road were getting louder, too. The struggle for first place was happening right at the end, on day two, leg five. Of course more people would come cheer us along.

I finally saw the massive walls of the town around Vanzeld Castle rising in the distance.

We were back at last. Time to take first—and if I didn't, at least I'd have given it my best shot!

I could feel the sweat dripping down my cheek. No matter how high my level was, running for an extended period of time was still tiring. But it wasn't like my batteries were done yet. My legs kept doing their job, hitting step after step. I was almost tempted to call it good exercise.

And at this point, the ones following behind would have the psychological advantage!

But my opponent was a pro. He shifted his gears up, and I could see him gaining distance.

Hmm, was I at a disadvantage because I was out of my element here...? I wasn't sure how I was supposed to approach this.

"You can do it! You can do it, you can do it! I know you can do it!"

Who was that?!

There was a high platform temporarily built on the side of the road, and Pecora was standing on top.

"You can do it! Go, go, go! ...Oh, I am cheering for everyone. Do you hear me saying any names? No, the demon king is not cheering for one specific team. Although I am the president of DKRBPU, so am I allowed to cheer for my elder sister?"

It didn't matter. I knew exactly what she was doing anyway!

In reality, in that moment, a strange sensation came over me.

How long had it been since I last put my all into something, or even worked

toward a certain goal?

I could probably safely say that I hadn't pushed myself to my limits ever since I maxed out my level, at least. In battle, I really could gravely injure any of my opponents...

But this was sports. I finally felt like I'd earned the right to truly compete.

My legs were still in good shape. They weren't cramping or anything at all. I wondered if that was because of my level, too.

When I entered the castle town, there were more and more people who came to watch and cheer us on.

But my daughters found me right away.

"Mommy, Mommy!"

I could hear Falfa's voice.

There they were; Fatla must have dropped them off. They were with Halkara and Rosalie, waiting right at the edge of the road for me. I also saw other residents of the demon world, like Pondeli and Nosonia.

Some say that athletes with the highest expectations in the Olympics usually crumble under that weight, and maybe that's how it is in a sudden-death round, but I didn't suddenly start panicking or freezing.

Their cheers simply became my motivation.

"Yeeaaaah!" I yelled and pushed ever forward. I had a goal. I was going to be number one.

People turned in my direction and waved.

If I ran straight toward my goal, and if he didn't pick up more speed, I could close the distance between us.

Right—it was obvious that my effort was going to pay off, and that encouraged me. The distance was closing.

And I could hear voices coming from the escort carriage the whole time.

"Pull ahead, you fool! You are simply lazy if you cannot get first now!"

Beelzebub was right.

I didn't want to give up when first place was right within reach.

"I'll keep going, even if I'm all sore tomorrow! I'll work hard today so I can rest well the next day!"

I pushed forward until I was finally near my target. I came up next to him... then got ahead!

Yes, I'm in first!

Of course, the cat-eared runner wasn't going to let me get away that easily.

I had a feeling he was going to try and kick me.

But I wouldn't let him.

I went full speed ahead and put distance between us.

My team's gonna be number one, so, sorry! Don't follow me!

I got even farther ahead. I was running much harder than when I'd passed first place.

"Maybe we were just supposed to be for show, but now that I'm a part of the competition, it's only right that I do my best!"

The belt was heavy, but it didn't bother me. I was only wearing it for today, after all.

I could see the finish line coming up.

But I wasn't the only one desperate to win this race.

The runner from Hell Plateau Karma University was coming up behind me. I didn't know his name, but he was doing well for going against me.

Neither of us was going to give up!

I was pushing off the ground so hard that I was leaving dents in my wake. But it gave me a huge boost, and I rocketed forward.

"C'mooooon!"

To be honest, it felt like I went too high in the air. Others might think I was trying to fly... Well, now I know what would happen if I tried jumping all the

time...

I'm not flying, okay? It's just a jump, okay? I was going to be pissed if I got disqualified because of that. Let me just emphasize that.

Shaken, I slowed down a bit.

If I landed on this trajectory, I knew my legs would go numb for a while, which would stall me—but it was too late for that! I'd think about it when I got there!

And then my body collided with some thin, white fabric as I connected back with the ground.

"What? Is this? Oh, is it...the finish line ribbon?"

My legs tingling, I grabbed the thin piece of fabric.

When I did, the loudest cheer I'd heard all race came surging forth.

"DKRBPU crosses the finish line!" I heard someone yell. Wow, I finished.

"I won... I won, right...?"

It didn't really feel like I'd done it after such an unorthodox sprint. I knew I ran my hardest, but I hadn't ever imagined I'd be crossing the finish line in first place.

I didn't know if I should keep standing there or what, so I took a few steps forward when the escort carriage overtook me, slowly turned to face me, then stopped.

"You did it!"

Beelzebub flew through the air right at me.

I didn't have the physical or emotional strength to catch her. My mind was practically blank after running so hard.

"Gaaah!"

We both fell right over.

"Why, Azusa, you've no energy at all," Beelzebub commented as she sat on top of me. *Thanks, Beelzebub.*

"Obviously. I space out sometimes, too..."

“Well, you did run at full speed, no? I didn’t think you were taking it easy.” She grinned.

“I have to run. It’s in the rules, and I don’t want to break the rules. That doesn’t conflict with my lifestyle. I haven’t exactly been training for this day or anything, either.”

Living a relaxed life didn’t mean being lazy about everything I tried my hand at.

“I saw how hard you ran, too,” I said, returning fire.

“I simply took my job seriously! There is nothing embarrassing about it!”

“I know. You put up a good fight, Beelzebub.” I extended my hand.

“And I was quite impressed by you, Azusa.” Beelzebub grasped my hand in turn. It was an awkward position, what with her sitting on me, but whatever.

Then another shadow fell over my face.

Flatorte was flying straight toward me.

“Congrats, Mistress!”

Whoa! This is just a wrestling move!

It was even heavier with Flatorte on me, too.

Beelzebub started complaining under the weight.

Well, it didn’t hurt as much as getting kicked during the race, so it was all good.



An hour later, we all stood on the winner’s podium.

We wore some intense-looking medals with skulls on them. I would’ve guessed we were a band of criminals, not the winning team.

Even though our team had been hastily thrown together, I was still happy we won. Flatorte jokingly bit into her medal, which I guess people did in all worlds.

“Now I can add to the sign at my gym: Winner of the Post Town Relay Race,” Fighsly said. I doubted the race had much to do with what she taught at her

gym, but I guess she just added what she could.

After the ceremony, Pecora stepped onto the podium again. “My... I had no idea My Own Royal Bounty Provisional University would take first... I worry we may have gone too far... Perhaps this was a miscalculation on my part...”

I kind of got how she felt. In a way, we’d totally embarrassed all the teams that’d practiced for this...

“But instead of apologizing, I will only take the opportunity to ask all the original competing teams in the race to work even harder! Think about how best to shorten your time at the beginning, or if proceeding forward is more advantageous than concentrating on taking down other teams!”

Her strategy was to scold them instead. Not a bad choice.

“Additionally,” Pecora said, shifting her attention to our team, “I have a feeling friendships have been fostered within My Own Royal Bounty Provisional University, and that is all right with me.”

Beelzebub scratched her cheek in embarrassment.

Friendship talk always sounds kinda silly, but we were all on the same team, so of course we’d built up some camaraderie.

“And well done today, all of you. You did a wonderful job. I believe this was the most interesting race of all that I’ve seen. We had a few teams that exploded without passing on their belts, too.”

I guess that was always a thing, huh...

“Also, today’s broadcast was streamed live on my channel, but anyone will be able to come back and watch it, so please subscribe~ ♪”

Don’t hog the video!

“And don’t forget to hit the like button~ ♪”

She’d added even more features since last time!

“And now, I would like to announce the dissolution of My Own Royal Bounty Provisional University.”

DKRBPU was K-A-P-U-T.

We were temporary college kids, but now we were back to who we used to be.

When Pecora stepped down from the podium, Beelzebub turned to me. I guess we didn't have enough of a conversation right when I finished running.

"I am quite happy to get this medal."

"You ran as hard as you could, so I couldn't afford to lose."

We high-fived each other. I was three hundred years old, but here I was acting like a kid.

"I shall be snoozing all day long on my day off tomorrow."

"And I think I'll have Pecora let me stay at the castle so I can chill."

I had the right to ask the "president" to treat us for our hard work. I just hoped my muscles wouldn't be screaming tomorrow.

"I thought you might say that. Let me have the girls at my house so you can relax."

"What happened to snoozing all day...? Is that the reason why you talked to me again?!"

It was true, though, that I wanted to give my body a rest, so I'd take it easy here for a bit before going back to the house in the highlands.

But there was still one last item on the program for the Post Town Relay Race.

Kuku came onto the podium. "Well done, everyone. To finish off, I will be singing the Post Town Relay Race's official theme song."

Oh no! She was going to sing that song again!

The somber lyrics of "Life of a Substitute" echoed around us.

We left under a cloud of depression.

The demons really need to pick their theme songs better.

The End



★ ★
The Red-Dragon
Academy for Girls
★ ★

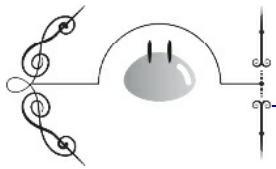
★ ★ I've Been Killing
SLIMES 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level. ★ ★

★ — SPIN-OFF — ★

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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FIRST DAY AT THE RED-DRAGON

ACADEMY FOR GIRLS



I was so nervous, I could hardly sleep, but I still awoke at my usual time.

When I rose from my bed, I changed from my pajamas into the uniform I'd laid out the night before. It was the first uniform I'd worn in my life. Well, except for when I tried it on to check the fit. It felt a bit tight now.

There came a knock at the door.

"Are you up, Laika? Can I come in?"

"Yes, Sister. Come in," I replied, and the door opened to reveal Leila standing there in her pajamas.

In the next moment, she was standing next to me and pulling me into a tight hug.

"Aww! You're cute as a bug in that uniform, Laika!"

The red dragons' movements were sharp and agile, and my sister was president of the student government. A typical red dragon would have a difficult time following her with their eyes. I had been unable to dodge her, so I did not shake her off.

"Yes, yes! Now, if you grew your hair out long like mine, I think it'd go perfectly with that uniform. I'm so excited~ Can I braid your hair next time? I love playing with people's hair!"

"Sister, red dragons though we may be, it is still too hot for me like this... And you're still in your pajamas."

I was not going to complain about every little thing, but my sister's problems

lay not exclusively in her pajamas. Her long hair was still a mess from sleeping. She must have just woken up.

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ll be all right; I’ll change before we leave. And my uniform might get dirty while I eat breakfast, so it actually makes sense not to get dressed first.”

“I understand, but then why did you advise me to change as soon as I woke up?”

“Because you’re a new student. You shouldn’t be rushing on the first day. I was stricter with myself at home right after I started school, too.”

“So you are less disciplined now, you mean.”

“You’re so picky for someone who’s got so much to work on herself.” Leila let me go and then started fiddling with my uniform tie. “There, perfect. It’s really hard to get the tie the right length.”

“Oh, did I not get it right...? This is only my first day, so I am still a bit clumsy here...”

“Well, I might’ve messed it up when I hugged you.”

“Then it is your fault!”

“Laika, if I remained this strict with myself as student council president, then I’d be too stiff to ever shift into dragon form. We need to relax.” Leila smiled her student council president smile—I could see everyone looking up to her, although I was unsure if she was admired in reality. I had not yet seen her at school, so it was possible that she was simply talking herself up.

However, that reassuring smile told me that I could trust her. She had a truly charismatic presence.

“I understand that rest is important,” I replied. “Without it, neither physical nor academic improvements will stick. Severe physical workouts do not improve one’s abilities, nor are they sustainable.”

“Whoo, so stiff! It’s almost hard to believe you’re my little sister.” Leila chuckled in exasperation.

“In a way, one could say that I turned out like this because I watched you

growing up.”



“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go show Mom and Dad just how great you look.” Leila came to stand behind me and prodded my back, taking me to the dining room.

This time, my parents fussed over me.

“Oh my! How lovely!”

“Yes, you look great, Laika.”

They seemed to be having fun, but I was uncomfortable the whole time. *I suppose I must accept it as a rite of passage...* I doubted they would fawn over me every day like this.

I was also delighted that my breakfast was a serving of steak for two dragons, apparently in celebration of my first day of school. I have heard that a portion for two dragons is a portion for twenty humans.

Five minutes before I left, Leila was rushing around to get ready, and she eventually emerged in her upperclassman uniform. Her bedhead was nowhere to be seen, and her hair clip stood out against her long hair.

“Well? Don’t I look like the student council president?”

My eyes widened in surprise that my sister could change so drastically, but I was so annoyed by her earlier behavior that I could not bring myself to simply compliment her.

“You must be careful not to praise yourself too much.”

“My little sister is a harsh mistress.” Leila sighed in a theatrical show of disappointment, then grabbed my hand as though we would be attacking in unison. I lost my balance and almost tripped.

“Sister, you are a coward to attack me out of the blue! Especially before school!”

“Yeah, we’re on our way. Let’s go.” She tugged on my hand even harder than before.

I would fall over if I stubbornly stayed in place, so I graciously took a step forward to walk beside my sister.

“I was under the impression that the older students arrive a little late on the

day of the entrance ceremony.” I had fully intended on going to school by myself today...

“The student council is welcoming the new students today, so we need to get there early. You’ll thank me.”

I was unsure if I would, so I refrained from replying and left the house.

Today, I was starting school at the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls.



There were several dragons—the ones who lived farther away from the school—flying overhead, so it was quite shady on the ground despite the sunny day.

We lived near the school, so we arrived in our human forms. The school building was designed for our human forms anyway. Dragon-scale buildings were simply not economically feasible, so red dragons typically lived their lives in their human forms. It really was common, although it did vary from dragon to dragon.

“Ooh, so many new students headed to the academy.” Leila was looking up at the dragons.

“You can tell they’re new?”

“Yeah. They’re not so great at flying, and they’re generally smaller than average.”

“I see.”

Leila and I did not speak very much on the way—going to school with her was miserable.

But I could not be bothered to explain exactly why, so I hugged my bag in front of me and started to walk quickly, at about fifteen *gilro* per hour. I was not a clingy little sister, so Leila did not find this strange at all.

The path going uphill became very steep.

The academy was in a large hollow in the ground near the sixth checkpoint up Mount Rokko, so the path grew steep partway there, and there were parts of the route where we had to climb up while holding on to a chain that had been

hammered into the ground. No human would be able to reach the school, but it was not difficult for any dragons.

Then, as I neared the academy, I found more cause for misery.

“Good morning, Leila.”

“It is lovely to see you, Leila.” “Greetings, President.”

The students were starting to greet my sister.

Even though I had heard that the upperclassmen would be arriving later, I found myself encountering many who had decided to come to school early for various reasons...

“Good morning, everyone. We’re so lucky to have good weather on the first day of school; what a relief! It’s been a bit quiet in the building since the seniors left, but let’s all do what we can to give the new crop of students the warmest welcome,” Leila replied with a dignified expression and an announcement that was hard to refute.

As she stood there, she was the shining example of the student council president. After so many years of her barging in to my room in her pajamas and bedhead, the sight was downright uncanny.

In a way, her transformation was much greater than the difference between dragon and human form.

I suppose I could have survived my sister’s little performance; however...

“Oh, is this your sister?”

“She’s adorable.”

“I am so jealous you have such an upstanding council president as your elder sister.”

I failed to escape...

Of course, I was garnering attention as I traveled to school with Leila.

I would have accepted the stares if I had done something to earn them, but I hated receiving all the attention simply because I was the student council president’s younger sister...

“Ah... My name is Laika... I am afraid I am nothing special, but I am pleased to meet you all... I am glad to make the acquaintance of my sister’s cohort...”

I greeted them anyway; I could not ignore them when they were right in front of me.

“She’s precious!”

“You have such good manners. It’s your sister’s influence, right?”

“Oh yes, I am more than honored to be considered among the president’s cohort.”

My simple greeting earned quite a reaction.

Oh...I’m simply being treated as a pet. Please do not pay me so much attention...

When they spoke, the new students making their way to the entrance ceremony noticed us as well.

“That’s the student council president and her younger sister.”

“I knew the president would look so prim and proper.”

“She’s way different from my lazy big sister.”

I wished I could fly away and hide in a cave somewhere in the volcano... I could feel a blush crawling up my face...

“Laika, you can be more confident. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” Leila patted me on the shoulder.

“I cannot... I am a new student with no record to be confident of. Such an attitude would only suggest I think too highly of myself...”

Perhaps some considered me lucky to have the student council president as my sister, but that was a foolish and untrue assumption.

This was an encumbrance. So many people would simply see me as the student council president’s younger sister.

If I ever came up short, they would all talk about how I failed in comparison to their dear president.

No matter what, I had to buck my sister's good—no, bad influences!

I stretched and began rushing forward. "Sister, I know the way to school, so I will go on ahead."

I had to remove myself from her.

I heard her talking behind me, but I had properly excused myself, so I would not bother with what she said. And if I were to greet all of her acquaintances, then I would never arrive at school.

However, a few minutes later, I glanced beside me...

...to find Leila walking apace with me with a cool expression.

How odd. I thought I put quite a bit of energy into getting ahead...

"You're panicking, Laika." Leila reached out to grab my hand. "I've been walking beside you for a while now... But you didn't even notice." She did not mention my attempt to leave her behind. She simply smiled. "We're not running late, so let's not start sweating before the sixth checkpoint. You don't want to be compared the more uncouth dragon tribes."

Ah, I knew right away that she was wholly steeped in the role of Leila the student council president now.

"All right. I will be more careful." I bowed my head, and a thought came to me.

My only choice was to become a fine dragon in my own right so that I would not lose to her.

I knew it would not be an easy road, but it was the only one I could take to free myself from this misery.

The academy was a magnificent building, like a temple; the walls and pillars seemed to be exuding light.

The yard in front of the school building was beautiful. Beyond the dragon-carved gateposts lay a large garden with the symbol of the academy sitting squarely in the center: a fountain of flame, the blazes soaring upward into the sky. A human school might perhaps have a water fountain, but this was a dragon school, and that meant fire.

“Those flames use the flammable gas that comes out of Mount Rokko. They’ve been there since before the academy was built,” my sister explained, as though she was the head of the academy.

Beyond that was the school building. From where I stood, it took the shape of an open-bottom rectangle. Beyond it were other buildings, such as the auditorium, and behind that was a beautiful lake of water that had seeped up from the volcano (I saw it when I came to take the entrance exam), but classes and most activities would be taking place in the building in the shape of an open-bottom rectangle.

“The entrance ceremony is in the auditorium. That’s where the new students are going, so we’ll say good-bye here. I’m going to go peek into the student council room.” Leila patted me on the shoulder. “There’s nothing to worry about. It’s normal for the first-years to be worried about something or other.”

“This helps me with nothing,” I protested.

“But if I don’t try to help you where I can, you’re just going to be upset with me, aren’t you?” she said with a devious grin, and I did not reply.

I hated to admit it, but she was right.

“Pain and worry are inevitable, so you should embrace it. I know you won’t let that stop you. You grow every time you feel those emotions. Keep going—so long as you keep concentrating on that, you can do anything.” Leila seemed larger-than-life in that moment. “Well, a blue dragon would wreck the whole school if they heard me saying ‘you can do anything,’ so maybe I shouldn’t say it...”

I suppose blue dragons were those delinquents that came to hover around Mount Rokko every once in a while. Their leader was someone named Flatorte; she often picked fights with Leila.

“I will be going now, Sister.”

“Okay.”

Leila gave me a little wave. It was a gesture a student leader would make, entirely different from her crass attitude at home.

Which one was the real her?



The entrance ceremony proceeded without much commotion.

Several important school figures, including the principal, gave speeches, after which the new student representative spoke...

And then Leila came up onstage.

When she did, several cheers erupted from the auditorium. From the voices, I could tell the majority were from new students.

“That’s the student council president.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“I wish I could be her sister.”

“Oh yeah, I think her actual sister is in our grade.”

I overcame my embarrassment, managed to lift my head, and watched my sister as she welcomed the new students. I had a feeling I would have attracted more attention had I kept my head down.

Because of that, I was able to see a student standing in front of me who was gazing up at Leila with stars in her eyes. Her hands were folded in front of her chest as though in prayer. *No need to treat her as a deity in the flesh.*

Leila, however, continued to speak without any signs of embarrassment. It was almost as though this praise was an everyday occurrence for her. If even I could sense the firmness of her character, then it was a given that the other students saw her as special.

She most certainly seemed like a divine, untouchable being compared to us first-year students.

Then some of her words from on high stuck with me.

“New students of the academy, you will fight in many battles, and I hope you will earn just as many victories. Our school motto is Challenge, Victory, Growth.”

The motto was only three words.

What Leila said rang loud in my ears, as though she was speaking directly to me. The forward-looking motto suited dragons well. I rather liked it.

Starting today, I was to begin my first year in the academy.

I would never stagnate and remain as I was on the first day of school! I would become the perfect dragon, so perfect that those who met me would not even think of my sister!

The entrance ceremony came to an uneventful close, we first-years were informed of our classes, and we made our way to our respective rooms.

“Hey! It says **Challenge, Victory, Growth** on the wall, too!”

When I entered my classroom, students who had arrived before me were pointing at the wall. It almost seemed as though the framed motto was watching over me.

All right, it's time for my first challenge.

I was going to be friends with the person sitting in front of me!

It was the same girl who had been standing right in front of me at the ceremony, looking up at Leila in awe and envy. Her long hair was neatly curled, pulled up on either side of her head like a chandelier. Styling it in such a manner seemed like more trouble than it would be worth, but perhaps only someone who had that much concentration every day could achieve such symmetry.

“Um, pardon me,” I said, and she stood up and whirled around to face me.

There was a big frown on her face, and she had her arms folded. “My name is Hialis. You are Laika, the student council president’s younger sister, correct?”

So she already knew who I was. I was not entirely pleased with that being the first thing she called me, however.

“That is correct. My name is Laika. I thought since we are sitting close to each other that we might be frie—”

“Face me in battle!” she declared, pointing at me.

“In...battle...?”

“You are the esteemed student president’s younger sister. You will have no

shortage of opponents here on the first day of school! Let me be your first trial!”

“Ah, I am glad to hear my sister means so much to you, but...why must I battle you...?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Admiration will not bring me to her heights; if I don’t act on it, I would be doing her a grave disservice. Training to one day surpass her is how I plan to thank her for inspiring me. And!” Hialis’s voice grew in volume. “She is not only well-mannered, but long-praised as the most powerful student in martial abilities in the school! I must make my way up, even if by force! I refuse to let my words be no more than words!” Hialis’s eyes shone brightly.

She was right!

What she said convinced me. I hoped to one day surpass my sister, myself—to aim for the very top.

Because it was Leila who was doing as she pleased with the title of strongest at the academy!

...Yet I was still unclear as to why this girl was challenging me and not my sister... I suppose she wanted to fight one who had spent most of her life by her side.

I had also spoken to Hialis with the intent of challenging myself.

But challenge alone was not enough. Of course, a challenge is important, because nothing can be accomplished without it, but without victory—without success—then stagnation is inevitable.

Victory or defeat—this was the perfect opportunity to draw that line.

I doubted Hialis would want to be friends with someone who turned tail and ran now anyway!

“Understood. I accept your challenge!”

The moment I said that, the happy atmosphere in the classroom was replaced by a kind of frenzy.

All those chatting and laughing, reading the new student brochures, or spending the time as they pleased immediately pulled the desks to the

perimeter of the room to create an open space in the center.

“Now this is a fight.”

“Red dragons always fight when they need to.”

“We first-years have to talk with our fists!”

Ah, this was a tradition of the academy.

One girl in my class stepped forward.

“If I may, I will be the referee for this fight. Since we are in the classroom, no dragon forms. No fire, either. This is a sudden death match with no time limit, only ending when one gives up or falls unconscious. Any objections?”

I was impressed—the people at the academy were always ready for battle.

“I have no problem with this.”

“Neither do I.”

Hialis and I faced each other in the open space in the classroom.

“Ever since recess in elementary school, I have been feared as Bodybreaker Hialis. I can tear an opponent’s muscles moments after touching them. Whenever we would play cops and robbers, any robber I would touch would drop to the ground in pain.” Hialis briefly extended her hands; perhaps that was her stance. It reminded me of a wrestling stance.

“I see. It seems you passed the entrance exam to the academy for good reason.”

The academy’s exam not only looked at academic skill, but also physical and martial skills.

“I wanted to see how much the student council president’s younger sister could do. You have great timing.” Hialis licked her own left hand to provoke me.

“I have a long way to match my sister in skill, but...you will regret making light of me!”

I turned straight toward Hialis and started with a punch.

I never hesitated in battle; I would get hit if I did! And now that the battle had

started, I would keep up the pressure!

Hialis crossed her arms to block my attack.

“Hah!” she shouted.

My punch bounced off!

My center of gravity moved backward.

“Action, reaction, and momentum!”

I did not know that was possible...! I cannot let my guard down here!

“There!”

As I leaned backward, Hialis reached out and touched my leg.

Ting.

There was an odd sensation in my leg—followed by searing pain!

“Rgh! Is this a muscle tear?!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! This is my body-breaking technique! You should be terrified; I know everything there is to know about muscles!” Hialis’s laugh echoed off the walls, almost as though amplifying the ache in my torn muscle. “I’ve already won! No one can concentrate on battle with such pain! There is nothing you can do to recover!”

Hialis started dealing me blow after blow. Though no one hit packed much punch, she dodged all of my counters right at the last second.

The pain was weakening my concentration!

To make matters worse, she tore another muscle in my other leg during the fight, and the pain dulled my mind even further.

This was bad—it was sending me into a terrible spiral!

From around the classroom, I could hear whispers. “I didn’t think this would be so one-sided...” “A bad condition can take out the foundations of even the most skilled fighter... And now both her legs are injured...”

All I could do in the moment was endure and find the key that would lead to my chance at victory. But I had to find it quickly; exhaustion would only make

this harder...

“I guess the president’s sister didn’t amount to much in the end. I had high hopes for you,” Hialis said as she continued her barrage. “If this is all, then I can surpass her and devote myself to my studies! I will be more than the strongest being in the academy!”

As Hialis delivered blow after blow, I somehow managed to keep myself in place with the heel of my left foot.

This was my chance to win.

“It seems you are losing some concentration yourself, Hialis,” I whispered.

“No need to pretend. I am destroying you!”

Hialis dealt a kick with her long legs. She was fully intending on taking me down with that one blow.

I blocked the attack with my right arm.

“Argh! She stopped it! No, her center of gravity is coming back forward...”

That was correct—and if she had been paying attention, she would have noticed it.

“Hialis, you have been thinking about the president this entire fight. But I am me! I am Laika the red dragon...before I am her sister!”

If you could not concentrate on the enemy in front of you, your attack and defense would inevitably be weak!

“You are battling me with the intention of fighting my sister—this mistake will prove fatal to you!”

I shifted into offense and leaned forward, stepping into Hialis’s space.

Hialis was unable to read me just then; I could tell by the way she spoke.

Her lapse in judgment would be her downfall!

I extended my arm, my right hand in a fist that went right into her!

“Ha! I’ll just deflect—” She brought her arms up to guard, but...it was no use.

“I have put my entire weight into this punch!”

I shattered her guard and hit her full force!

“Gh...ghaaaaaaah!” Hialis spun backward and collided hard with the classroom wall.

The impact shook the framed Challenge, Victory, Growth from its spot on the wall, and it fell on top of her head.

“I—I have...lost...in my own challenge... I have no regrets...”

The referee yelled, “Hialis has given up! That’s it! Laika wins!”

Applause and congratulatory cheers erupted around me.

“I did...all that I could.”

I could feel a fire quietly burning in my chest.

I had a feeling that I was inviting unwanted attention on my first day...but I could not grow stronger by giving into the need to fit in. Once I had been challenged, I needed to prove victorious, after all.

This was how it was at the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls—this was a garden of women who would master both beauty and strength!

I extended my hand to the collapsed Hialis.

“That was a nice fight. My legs still hurt.”

“I had no chance. Just as you said, I’d lost sight of who I was fighting against... How embarrassing.” Hialis dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Then you must challenge me again.”

That was a part of our school motto, after all.

“Of course.” Her expression relaxed, and she took my hand.

“Starting today, Laika, I will serve you.”

That was a strange expression...

“Ah, well, if we were to be friends—”

“We are classmates, but now I am your younger sister. I will grow and improve with your guidance.”

Hrmmm...

“Um...can we not be friends instead?”

“No. It’s an unwritten rule here at the academy that when you lose in battle against an upperclassman or classmate, you become a ‘sister’ under them. I can’t escape the rules by pretending not to know them; I refuse to make a fool of myself right on the first day.”

I did not know about this unwritten rule!

More importantly, why did Leila not tell me about this before...? Leila!! She intentionally kept it from me, didn’t she...? That was the only thing I could think of...

“Ah... I didn’t know about this when I agreed to fight...”

“I put in my all, and I still lost to you. I have no qualms about being your younger sister!” Hialis yelled.

Cheers came from our classmates around us.

“Fantastic.”

“What a touching change of heart.”

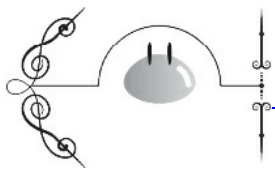
“Oh, my heart...”

I could not turn her down now. “U-understood... I accept you as my sister...” I bowed.

“Me too. I’m glad you accept. Of course, you’re always welcome to come to me for help. I’m here for you.” Hialis smiled brightly.

I had a feeling I’d failed in making a friend, but...I had someone on my side on the first day of school already...so I suppose that was fine.

My days at the academy had just begun!



THE ACADEMY'S TRAINING

ASSOCIATION



Almost two weeks had passed since I entered the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls.

At the moment, I was not walking to school with Leila. I was leaving the house on my own. This was not due to any bad blood between us; she simply tended to leave at the last moment, which was too late for my liking.

Today, she had yelled at me in her pajamas: “Laika, you traitor! I know this is your rebellious phase!” She did this most days. And a rebellious phase is not against your siblings.

As I ignored her and was about to leave for school, she grabbed me from behind before I could step through the door.

“Sister! You are *truly* in the way! Stop it!”

“Nooope! You’re being so mean, so I’m not letting you go! Aww, you’re sooo cute and little~” she whined.

I used all my strength to get out of her grasp, but I could not escape...

“You’re soft, Laika. You’re nowhere near strong enough to escape the grasp of the academy’s strongest.”

“Wh-what is the point of all this?! You are running the risk of being even later right now!”

“Ah, naive Laika. I’m clinging to you perfectly aware that I might be late!”

“Why are you so proud of this?!”

She let me go after about five minutes, but because of that, I proceeded to

school in a bit of a rush... The student council president should not even consider being late to school. Of course, during those five minutes, she had not even changed her clothes, so perhaps she was wolfing down some toast right about now.

However, though I left home alone, that did not mean I was alone the entire time.

I proceeded quickly along the route to school, one that would most certainly destroy any human who attempted to traverse it, and I found Hialis waiting for me at the third checkpoint.

“Good morning, Sister.”

“Good morning, Hialis.”

Hialis waved to me, and I waved back.

“It was quite a handful yesterday getting so many invitations from all those clubs, wasn’t it? Some of the ones I saw were from the track and field club, the sky racing club, the flame-throwing club, the eating contest club, the chess club, and the quiz club.”

“Yes... I find it painful to turn them down, but...I suppose I went knocking on a lot of club doors, so I guess it is partially my responsibility...”

The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls, of course, had plenty of clubs. We had some that were unique to dragons, such as the ones involving flight and flame, but there were plenty of others that could also be found at human school. Additionally, joining a club was not required, so students were allowed to opt out.

In the spirit of challenge, I’d spent trial days at many different clubs. However, I refused to officially join them until I’d seen what they were all doing, even when I received an invitation.

It was doubtlessly due to how I presented myself that all these clubs were expecting me to join them.

“It is perfectly reasonable for all these clubs to invite you. You set a new school-wide record in the flame-throwing club; almost no one else could light

that timber. And you surpassed the records set by the regular competitors in the track and field club.”

“I am happy to have made an impression, but I had a feeling it was not really going to help me grow... I am not entirely sure about joining them.”

But of course, joining a club that did not entirely suit my interests didn’t seem right, either... I wondered what I should join.

“If I may, Hialis?”

“What is it, Sister? Oh, I bought these, so please have one.” She handed me a jam roll, so I took it.

“*Nom, nom...* Ah, do you think you could stop calling me Sister...?”

It felt rather formal, and we were in the same class. It almost felt as though I had been held back a year.

“No, I must respect someone more skilled than I as my sister. That is my responsibility as the one who lost my own challenge against you. I cannot compromise. Even when both parties are in the same grade, the school’s unwritten rule dictates that whoever loses supports the winner and treats her as an elder sister.”

I had a feeling that an *unwritten* rule couldn’t dictate anything in particular...

“By the way, Hialis, what club have you settled on joining?”

“Ghost club.”

“Ghost club? Joining a club isn’t required here, so you don’t have to register if you don’t—”

“Its official name is the ghost investigation club.”

“Oh, that sort of club. I cannot say I am the fondest of ghosts...” I hated scary stories.

I saw a glint in Hialis’s eyes.

“Sister, if I told you a scary story during battle, would that ruin your concentration, leading to my victory?”

“No! That would be unfair! And even if you did, I would challenge you again

with earplugs.”

It had been two weeks since I started attending the academy.

I was already walking to school with a classmate, so I thought my school life was going quite well already.

“I also have some chocolate buns, Sister. Do you want one?” Hialis had all sorts of things ready for me.

“Yes, thank you. There is a saying that goes: An empty stomach does not lend to battle. It is important to maintain peak condition.”

Hialis munched on her own chocolate as we walked to school. The academy allowed us to purchase snacks and walk around eating them. Dragons were hungry creatures, after all.

Along the route to school, the alpine plants were in full bloom with pretty yellow flowers. I believed they were of, or related to, the lily genus. At the moment, we were walking at a brisk fifteen *gilro* per hour down Academy Road, which had a festive atmosphere around it.

Ahead of us were two upperclassmen engaged in battle.

“I’m impressed.”

“I could say the same for you!”

“But that lovely little sister of yours isn’t suited for you. I’ll be taking her!”

“Cut the back talk!”

From what I could tell, they were battling over one of their underclassman sisters.

Sister, in this case, was not a sister of blood relation, but simply an underclassman who would follow another around. It was not entirely unusual for students to form pseudo-sisterly relationships within a girls’ academy.

I had heard that these sisterly relationships stemmed from the military systems the humans invented in the distant past. Within these military systems, the men of those squadrons would vow brotherhood to one another and fight side by side, thus achieving impressive results against the biggest enemy

armies.

This was incorporated into the warlike world of the red dragons, and we now formed a similar type of sisterhood.

I suppose the girls' academies of other races would have some type of pseudo-sisterly relations like this, but our battle-oriented approach was unique to the red dragons.

I must add that much like other races, it is much more common to have an underclassman approaching an upperclassman to take her in as her younger sister or vice versa. Even if one is asked to battle, it is perfectly within one's right to say no.

"We've been at school for two weeks now. I think this is about when the upperclassmen start looking to take on younger sisters."

"It seems so. I cannot say I am terribly interested."

"That's probably normal. You already have the president. And not very many people can match her, if any."

"No, I simply have no intention of doing such a thing... I believe that excelling on one's path of choice is a more efficient method of training than studying under a single person."

The academy, incidentally, was made up of six grades, and each school "year" lasted for ten years, which would mean those in year six would be graduating from the academy after sixty years of attendance. Dragons lived very long lives.

"That's one way to think of it. You are already powerful, and you cannot make weak upperclassmen your younger sisters—and I already am your sister," Hialis said with a triumphant look.

"I had no intention of forming any sisterly bonds..."

"Think about this rationally. Can an older sister actually choose who her blood sister is going to be? She can't ask her mother to re-birth her because she doesn't like her, right? That is what this is about."

"I find the logic somewhat strange, but...it is just a pseudo-relationship, so..."

"Would you like a honey butter roll?" Hialis produced yet another kind of roll

from her bag.

“Yes, please.”

I bit into it. *Mmm. I suppose a relationship like this is all right.*

But today, my mission was to continue searching for a club that was to my liking.



After school, I found myself surrounded by a great number of upperclassmen.

Some were holding tennis rackets, while others had large hoes resting on their shoulders. Most had stern looks on their faces.

Someone ran by me, one I believe was the same year as myself, screaming, “Ahhh! Noooooo!”

“Um... If I may, I cannot get by with you all surrounding me like this, so could you please move?”

“No,” said the one with the tennis racket. “You’re coming with us. Give us your time.”

“I appreciate the invitation, but I must refuse. I believe I told you how I felt before.”

She stared hard at me.

I stared back at her.

Whoever looked away here would lose. And I would not lose. Now that this was a competition, I had to win.

All of a sudden, she bowed deeply to me.

“Please! Join the tennis club! We could win nationals with you on our team!”

Afterward, everyone else started bowing in sequence, exclaiming how they wanted me to join them.

The one shouldering the hoe joined the fray. “Please come to the farming club! We’ll grow the best onions!” At a glance, the hoe looked like a weapon, so I would recommend not carrying them around.

“My apologies, but I have not yet felt there would be any significance in joining any of these clubs. Please allow me to keep searching.”

It was the only thing I could say to them.

Some held their ground. “You’ll get better with us!” they said. “We’ll help you get stronger!” But that was not the issue here.

“I understand, but my answer remains the same. I can only join clubs where I feel as though I can grow on my own,” I replied bluntly, staring back at the person from the tennis club. *Please move out of my way* is what that meant.

“Eep!”

She stepped back, creating a path for me. The rest stepped away to create space as well.

“Incredible... Her eyes are full of insatiable drive... I doubt we could handle someone like her in our club...”

“Yeah... Our club might get stronger overall if she joined, but then it would probably transform into something entirely different.”

“She’s basically toxic. No one should be asking her to join if they’re not completely aware of what they’re taking on...”

I had a feeling they were *too* afraid of me, but...they were mostly correct. If I became the star of a club, then I would receive plenty of praise, to be sure. But if I wanted to grow, that seemed more like the long way around.

If I received nothing but praise for who I already was, then my desire to improve would only dull.

It would be like rounding off the tip of a spear!

As I walked down the hall, I came across Leila approaching from the opposite direction.

No, perhaps it would be best to refer to her as the president now.

She had other members of the student council in tow, and she shone nobly among them.

I almost doubted my own eyes—this could hardly be the same girl who lazed

about at home. My sister was doubtlessly the person who garnered the most respect among students here in the academy.

The student council president came to stand before me. “It’s only been two weeks, and I can hear your name echoing throughout this entire school, Laika. Some even say you might be the kind of talent we only see every half a century,” the president said to me as she played with her hair.

I met her gaze with a hard stare. “I thought you were the talent we only see every half a millennium, President. I still have plenty of room for improvement.”

Indeed—I could not rest on my laurels just yet. I had grown up watching Leila, after all.

She was a legendary red dragon, said to have been challenged to innumerable battles by her seniors not long after entering the school. She won every time, stole their badges, then commanded them as her own younger sisters.

One month after starting, she was called the shadow student council president, and after the elections, she was voted in as the real president as a first-year.

That was my sister—Leila.

Despite how mighty she was, her superior position meant I had to do what I could to surpass her; I would not let my path come to an abrupt end!

Furthermore, I had never in my life fought physically with her.

The only time she ever touched me was when she was being excessive with her affection, and I had never attacked her. To be more precise, I had never been able to. Even as a child, I could sense just how limitless this dragon was.

An electrifying atmosphere overcame the hallway, but those standing beside Leila did not seem to mind it.

The people here could likely sense just what I was capable of.

“Such fire in your eyes, Laika. You remind me of the president from years ago,” said one of the girls flanking my sister.

In the next moment, she vanished.

—No.

She was right next to me, with a hand on my shoulder.

“But that’s not enough. You can’t join the student council like this.”

I had not been able to follow her movements at all... I had not even sensed that she was attempting to move... How did she manage such speed...?

“Cut it out, Wyrmspeed Ricuen of the Four Secretaries,” the president warned.

By then, the hand on my shoulder was already gone, and Wyrmspeed Ricuen had retaken her position next to the president.

“I overstepped. I was simply intrigued by your little sister.”

“I understand. I think she’s an outstanding member of her cohort. She’s quite powerful for having just entered the school.” Leila was complimenting me, but the tone was rather cold. “But that’s unlucky for her.” The president laughed the same way my sister laughed at home. “Because it’s hard to grow without a relatively close goal to work toward. The first-years are a bad crop this year.”

I was shocked.

That was true...

It seemed my sister had some classmates from her own year among the student council members. That meant she had people beside her who could work hard.

On the contrary, I had not yet found someone who could challenge me within my own grade.

“But it’s still amazing that people have already stopped calling you the president’s sister. I know it’s not much coming from me, but take it as a compliment.”

Clap, clap, clap.

The president offered me slow, congratulatory applause.

“Of course. I will strive to do even better.”

“I know. You have no choice but to climb to my heights. You have to choose

your own path in life, but I know you can reach me eventually.”

The student council walked past me, carrying with them a dignity befitting the best of the student body.

I was certain that each member individually had enough power to single-handedly raze an entire country.

“It is imperative that I choose my club now,” I murmured to myself once they were gone. “Or perhaps I will find that it’s best if I don’t join any of them.”



“...My apologies, but I must decline.”

A member of the philosophy club had invited me to “find the truth of the cosmos together!” But I left the classroom without turning back.

“An admirable spirit, but their approach differs much too greatly from mine.” Sitting at a desk and studying could only improve one so much.

The philosophy club was the last one I visited, and their ideals did not coincide with mine, either. I exited the school building in need of fresh air.

There was a small pond behind the school; it was like a little park. The volcano’s groundwater was said to come up here, and the water was clear. I sat on a bench beside it.

In the end, none of the clubs offered what I was looking for.

Perhaps I had to think on my own about what I would do.

“You seem down, Sister.” Hialis came to sit beside me.

“What about your club, Hialis?”

“Right now, we’re searching for ghosts on campus.”

“Oh...I suppose the ghost club would do that...” I was not fond of that sort of thing.

“It seems like you haven’t found a club yet.” Hialis guessed what was going on from my expression.

“I visited every club, but I could not find one that would help me grow the way I want. I suppose this means I must not rely on others...”

“Did you really visit *every* club, Sister?”

What a strange thing for her to ask. I looked at her blankly, and she explained further.

“I heard there are some people who carry out their activities far from the active center here in the academy. I think you may have missed them.”

“You ‘hear’? That sounds almost like unofficial club activity.” Hialis nodded and then pointed to a place beyond the pond, the opposite direction from the school building.

She pointed to the cliffs at the edge of the volcanic crater in which the academy sat, where there were several natural caves set into the wall.

“Oh, that is a part of campus, too.”

“It is. They say some of the upperclassmen do nothing but train in those caves. I heard about it while investigating stories about ghosts.”

“I find it highly suspicious that you are phrasing it like a ghost story!”

“They’re called the training association. I’m not sure if they actually exist or not, but if you’re lost enough to come sit on this bench, then why not look for them anyway?”

A sensible suggestion, I realized.

I had not looked *everywhere* yet; I could not come to a stop just yet.

I squeezed Hialis’s hands with both of my own. “Thank you, Hialis! I will do all that I can!”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all. I’m your younger sister, after all.”

I didn’t much care for the “sister” dynamic—Hialis was my friend.



Of all the many little caves I could choose from, I made a discovery in the first one I checked.

I found (what looked to be) an upperclassman engaging in superhuman—superdragon training.

She did not even wear a school uniform—instead, she wore ripped and

tattered clothing, much like the kind I would expect a reclusive monk who lived in the wilderness to wear.

Though the only source of light was from a small lamp, I could see just how dirtied her face was. Her hair barely came down to her neck, and I nearly mistook her for a young boy. It was incredibly rare to find a student here in the academy who did not grow her hair long at all. Though my own hair was not terribly long, I was still growing it out due to my sister's influence.

But her physique was a trivial matter.

The most important thing was how extraordinary her method of training was.

She was doing push-ups without using her hands at all—her arms were firmly stuck to her sides!

Were they even “push-ups” without the motion of pushing? Yet, it did not seem as though she was using her back muscles at all—how her body moved up and down was the same motion as that of push-ups.

“U-um, excuse me! How are you doing those push-ups?” I had to ask.

This person was accomplishing nothing short of a miracle.

Her head turned toward me as she continued her no-arm push-ups. “I train. That’s it. Once you can freely control all the muscles in your body, this is nothing.”

She gave me an answer without any arrogance—or with humility, I suppose—and replied simply as she was.

“Um...are you a part of the training association?”

“Some call it that. I have been in this cave for so long that I’ve forgotten.”

If she spent all her time in this cave, did she not receive class credit...?

No, perhaps that was a small matter for someone on the road to mastery. Or perhaps, thinking about it logically, they simply came to the cave and trained here after school every day. One could not keep food here, after all.

“What is your name?”

“I do not have a name to give you, and so you may call me as you like.”

I knew it. This person would be able to help me grow!

“Understood. So...please allow me to take inspiration from your hair and call you Miss Pixie Cut.”

“Permission granted,” Miss Pixie Cut said, her face still straight. I think she would react the exact same way if a ghost were to speak to her.

“Would you mind if I train next to you? My name is Laika; I am a new student who started school last month.”

Miss Pixie Cut fixed her eyes on me. There was a strength to her insight that did not seem possible for an academy student. “You are the type of dragon who would stay until I gave you permission, whether or not I initially said yes. I can tell. Do as you please.”

“Thank you!”

I could hear my own voice echoing throughout the cave.

And that was how I became a member of the training association.



From then on, I always made my way to Miss Pixie Cut’s cave after class.

Not only did she do push-ups without using her arms, she had plenty of other superdragon regimens in her arsenal.

One of them was a very slow and deliberate way of training the abdomen muscles.

Once an abdominal exercise becomes easy, one uses all the muscles besides those in the abdomen. This drives the abdomen to its limits during a slow sit-up.

Miss Pixie Cut did this exercise at the speed of a flower blooming. As she did so, she put her ab muscles to work with sheer force of will.

“This is what it means to be able to control your muscles at will. If you master this, you can train at any moment in time.”

“I see! You are truly impressive!” I mimicked her and slowly engaged in the exercise.

This was so I could reach even greater heights, what regular muscle training

could not do!

Sometimes, she would sit with her legs folded and meditate.

I would copy her then, too, and meditate beside her. I slowly inhaled, then exhaled, and dismissed all errant thoughts from my mind.

“Listen. Picture your enemy in your mind—a most powerful and great enemy.”

“Yes!”

The enemy that came to mind...was Leila. I did not hate my sister, but she was still great and powerful.

“Defeat your enemy in one blow. Do not flinch, do not fear if your enemy attempts to attack you. You will be attacking as well.”

The student council president was noble and beautiful. There was an aura about her that made anyone hesitate to even approach her. Even though she was just a picture in my mind now, that still held true.

Do not run. The moment you turn to flee, you will have lost.

Face her.

Leila grew in size in my mind as the image of her was approaching me. She readied herself to attack. The most powerful dragon in the academy was going to attack me!

Even though this was all in my mind, fear still boiled up inside of me.

No. I still cannot overcome her.

I had taken it for granted that I could never win against her.

“Stand your ground, Laika!” Miss Pixie Cut suddenly appeared in my imagination.

No, her voice was real. I could feel the sound in my ears.

That very real sound created a change in my imagination.

“Laika, this world only exists in your head. You have nothing to lose. You will not get hurt. Push forward.”

“Okay!”

Leila’s fist was approaching me—which meant she was within attacking range for me, too!

I sent my fist flying toward my imaginary sister.

“Sister! This is all my power!”

I opened my eyes.

It happened naturally, as though I was waking from a dream.

“You defeated your vision, Laika,” Miss Pixie Cut murmured quietly. “But this is not the end. Your training does not stop here. Now do it again.”

“All right! ...And if I may ask a favor of you?”

Miss Pixie Cut looked at me and commanded me to speak with her eyes.

“May I refer to you as my sister?”

Was the one under whom I was already studying not perfectly apt to be my sister?

And at this point, I could no longer consider her a stranger. Had I been born a little earlier, perhaps I would have been just like her.

Miss Pixie Cut remained silent for a moment, then slowly shook her head.

“There is someone more suited for that title in your life.”

I had been planning to insist. But when she said that, I had no choice but to agree.

“Do not look to me as your sister. I am still in training. You have your sights set even higher than that.”

Miss Pixie Cut was telling me not to compromise so easily.

“Understood. Perhaps finding someone to be my sister will be part of my training.”

I closed my eyes again to meditate.



Two months had passed since I joined the training association.

“You’ve got a kind of dignity around you now, Laika,” Leila commented as we were eating dinner.

She was overall too relaxed when she was at home; she was already in her dressing gown now.

“Is that so? It is hard for me to tell.”

“Yeah—the same kind of aura as the real big shots. But you’re not trying to force it or anything. You’re at home in it.”

I was happy to hear this coming from her.

“Is it true that you’ve been training in the caves? The training association, right?”

I had nothing to hide, and I had reported as such to the academy, so I gave her an affirmative.

“Uh-huh. That’s strange.”

“Strange? How so?”

“No, it really doesn’t matter to you, so don’t worry about it. I can tell you’re getting stronger. You’ve had lots of people ask to spar you, and you’ve won every single time, right?”

“Yes. Some people will approach me during lunch. They are all second-and third-year students.”

It was not odd among the red dragons to schedule appointments for their battles. Cowardly sneak attacks were frowned upon, of course, so one could say that taking the proper steps to set an official match was commended.

“I think you’ll be reaching the top much faster than I thought. You might even be able to join the student council.”

Despite her praise, I found myself not caring one bit. It was a surprise.

Instead, I replied thusly:

“I am certain I will catch up with you.”

The following day, I arrived at the cave as I always did after classes.

I was still unable to do any armless push-ups, but I had learned how to push myself up with my arms stuck to my sides.

I could do this by pressing my arms against a rock and lifting my body that way. By continuing this, I would one day be able to do it simply by using my muscles.

As I trained, Miss Pixie Cut said something quietly. She often spoke without any preamble.

“You have cultivated plenty of strength, Laika. Spar with me.”

I thought she would one day suggest a match between us, but I imagined this would not happen for quite a long time yet.

“All right. I accept; I will not run.”

“But we will not be fighting with our fists and feet. We will battle in our minds.”

“In our minds?”

Even after training with her for two whole months, I was still confounded.

What happened in my mind most certainly would be different from what happened in her mind. How were we to battle?

“If you enter a deep meditation, we should be able to meet in the depths of our minds. I know you will be able to reach those depths.”

I thought it impossible, but I could not think of any reason she would lie to me.

I did as I was told and closed my eyes.

Slowly, ever slowly, I submerged myself into the depths of my imagination, deeper than the clear pond behind the school building, it felt.

The next thing I knew, Miss Pixie Cut stood before me.

“There you are, Laika,” she said.

She stood not in the cave, but in some field.

She and I were the only ones who existed here. There was no need for either

of us to say any more.

Miss Pixie Cut dashed right toward me. There was no hesitation in her movement. She had not even thought of going easy on her apprentice.

And so I would fight back with all I had.

I transformed into my dragon form and spewed bright crimson flames toward her!

This was the world of imagination, which meant I could also change form in the blink of an eye and douse her with searing-hot flame!

This was the most powerful attack I could muster as our hearts clashed.

This was not a battle between flesh and blood, but of heart and mind!

I breathed my flames until Miss Pixie Cut's image melted before my eyes!

"—You win."

Her voice woke me, and I was back in the cave.

For the first time, she smiled.

"Though it was only for a short time, you have surpassed me. I give you this cave. I will travel to train in another land." Miss Pixie Cut quietly stood.

She would not be here tomorrow. There was no hesitation to her actions at all. But that did not mean I could not try to stop her.

"No! You can stay! Please stay with the training association!"

It was thanks to her help that I had gotten so much stronger!

"No, I'm leaving. And I was planning on going somewhere where it is not illegal for me to be anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not a student here at the academy. I simply wander from place to place as I better myself. I should not stay so long here on campus."

She was not my upperclassman!

"Farewell. We may meet again someday." Miss Pixie Cut quickly left.

In my shocked stupor, a thought came to me.

Indeed, the association had been an “unofficial” club... Which simply meant no one from the academy was a member...



On my way home that day, Leila rushed to catch up with me.

Judging from how she patted my shoulder from behind, I could tell she was now at-home Leila and not president Leila.

“Hey, Laika, I was really wondering about all this club stuff, so I took a look at the student club registration records, and...besides yourself, no one else is a part of the training association.”

“...Ah, yes. I would suppose so.”

“But it said you joined an already-existing club, so what’s all that about?”

I pretended not to know. “I cannot say. Perhaps I joined a club run by a ghost?”

Leila tilted her head. “It’s not like you to lie about this stuff. I think you might have some bad influences in your class.”

“If I were to be subject to anyone’s terrible influences, then I would say you already served that role long ago.”

“Uh-uh. I’ve been a great influence. I’ve been leading by non-example. Be thankful.” Leila had made that up herself.

Miss Pixie Cut had never even told me her name. I was looking forward to seeing her again.

“Sister, did you ever meet anyone you wanted to make your pseudo-sister?” I asked casually.

“Aren’t you glad you have me for a sister forever?” she replied.

“That is not what I mean. I mean studying under someone else as their younger sister... Ah, perhaps you don’t want to want to answer...”

“To be honest, no. Because I’ve always been the strongest.”

Leila gripped my shoulder tightly and pulled me into a hug. Though no one

was watching us, I felt it was a bit much.

But I knew I still had to surpass her somehow.

Right now, I knew I did not need a pseudo-sister to guide me.

To me, my own sister stood at the pinnacle of all of my goals.

I would aim for where she stood.

It was worth it enough to make such a difficult task my objective.

The End

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's been a while! You know what time it is—it's time for the afterword!

I first have an announcement to make.

That's right—*I've Been Killing Slimes* is getting an anime adaptation! Yay!!!

I've been taking it slow as I work on the original novels, and at last, it will finally be animated on-screen. This is all simply because I've had all your support this whole time. Truly, thank you so much!

The voice actors will be the same as those who played those parts in the drama CDs so far. I am truly happy to hear the voices of Azusa & co. we already know and love.

And I'm not quite sure, but I think those in charge of the multimedia representation of the series did negotiating in order to have these busy voice actors come back to reprise their roles. I am thankful.

Anime productions always involve the work of an unbelievable number of people, so there are doubtlessly some individuals working hard whose efforts will never be known, much less to me. I cannot thank these people enough.

I've also heard whispered on the wind that the person who made the logo for the anime had such a difficult time because the title is so long. I am so sorry the title is long... Even I call it *I've Been Killing Slimes* and not by its full name... I would be perfectly happy if the rest of you remembered it as *I've Been Killing Slimes*, too.

I'm hoping to inform you all of any more details as they come up. If I'm able to write them down in the next book, then I will certainly put them down there, but afterwords are no good for conveying information quickly, so if you are interested in this news at all, then please follow the official *I've Been Killing Slimes* Twitter: @slime300_PR. We got a lot more followers when the anime

adaptation was announced. Thank you so much.

I know you're thinking, *All this guy says is "thank you,"* but this is the most thankful I have ever been in my life, so please be patient with me.

Also, I only managed to get this far with the support of so many people, including illustrator Benio and comic adaptation artists Yusuke Shiba and Meishi Murakami. I ask for your continued support into the future, too!

This volume's cover, illustrated by Benio, can be summed up in one word: cool. I really hope you all take your time to really appreciate it. Personally, this is the one time I'm truly glad the series is printed at a larger size than regular paperbacks.

In the comic adaptation, things are getting livelier as more characters are added, so I am certain things are going to become even more funny and interesting. I simply cannot wait!

Now, a special limited edition of the next volume, Volume 12, containing a drama CD will go on sale alongside the normal version! Laika will be the focus this time! Preorders have already started, so please check it out!

As for all the previous limited editions, as a rule, there are no reprints for these things, especially the ones that include extras such as CDs. Considering how difficult it is to obtain them once they go out of stock, if you're determined to have one for yourself, you should preorder.

Also, speaking of Laika, her spin-off story, "The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls," is included in this volume. It's a story about how Laika grew and matured before she met Azusa. I really hope you enjoy it.

This is supposed to be an afterword, but I haven't written about Volume 11 at all. I'll put down some thoughts here while we're at it.

We did a relay race in this volume. Stories that require many characters are normal now, but this was not something we could do in Volumes 1 or 2. It's because the story has gone on for so long that I was able to write it. I'm deeply moved just thinking about it.

That said, I didn't purposely set out to write a story that featured a lot of characters. I was just watching the big relay race on TV and started writing

because of that random reason... A good portion of the stories in this series come from odd places like that. To put it nicely, that's what gives the series some of its sense of life, and I hope you're enjoying that aspect of it.

Now, Volume 12 and its limited edition with drama CD will be on sale in April.

A story that started when I came up with the phrase *I've Been Killing Slimes* is finally going to be animated—it honestly feels like alchemy. Slimes are now spreading at a rate that I can't control, so as the original author, I'm just going to watch over them with fondness.

I hope you continue to enjoy *I've Been Killing Slimes*!

Kisetsu Morita





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